We Are Now Conjoined by Events That Have Shaped Us. Only Our Reunion Will Consummate It Fully

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Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Anthony Dimmond, Augustuv-Magnus Coquille - OMC, Abigail Hobbs, Winston (Hannibal), Alana Bloom, Margot Verger, Chiyoh (Hannibal), Le Chiffre, Original Female Character(s), Rinaldo Pazzi, Jack Crawford, Beverly Katz, Brian Zeller, Jimmy Price, Francis Dolarhyde, Reba McClane, Bedelia Du Maurier, Duncan Vizla | Black Kaiser, Freddie Lounds, Original Child Character(s), Mischa Lecter, Dr. Cordell Doemling, Mason Verger
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by TheWitchofStJohns, UnknownMusing

Summary

Following the sad events of "Thorns of Betrayal, Pain, Anguish and Loss," Hannibal/Nimue accompanies their husband, Augustuv-Magnus Coquille, to their lavish mansion in Venice for the first time. Amnesiac Anthony, washed up on the shores of Reykjavik, Iceland, after being stabbed by Coquille and tossed into the sea, has been adopted by two boys, Lucien and Markus, who live alone without parents. And Will has escaped the loathsome Mason Verger and returned with Winston to Florence, where he seeks out Abigail, who has been living as Hannibal's daughter and attending the University of Florence; she had been blackmailed into betraying Hannibal's, Will's and Anthony's whereabouts by Coquille.

Seek and Ye Shall Find

Chapter Summary

> Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye
> shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:
> For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh
> findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.
>
> - Matthew 7:7-8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SIX WEEKS LATER

LOCATION: COQUILLE'S MANSION RESIDENCE OVERLOOKING THE CITY OF VENICE, ITALY

LATE EVENING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Mr. Coquille-Venomis. Mrs. Coquille-Venomis. Welcome home."

The black-clad butler, Mr. Vincent Rasiu-Velecchio, greets us with a smart bow as the rest of the servants of the household bring in the travelling bags. I stand in the hallway, gazing up at the silver chandelier above my head. It takes the form of entwined snakes with rubies and fiery opals hung from their mouths, almost resembling spilled blood. To my right, double doors with ornate knockers in the shape of Medusa's screaming head lead into the dining area; to my left is the smoking room joined with a large study. Large wide stairs fanning outward lead up to a small landing where they split apart, left and right, and continue upward.

As I ascend the stairs, I observe the pictures and photographs of the Coquille ancestors that line the walls. The one in the center, a painting of a tall man with both hands on the shoulders of two young boys, captures my attention. It is the boy on the right which makes my heart skip a beat as I recognize distinctly the face of... *Anthony*. I pause on the stairs, memories overtaking me. My darling Anthony, who had proposed marriage between himself, Will and I

(*Will! Where are you, my love?*), while we danced together at his uncle's party. I begin to tremble as I remember how he tried to rescue me from my imprisonment on Augustuv's private yacht, the *Sedah*, only to be seized by my husband and stabbed in the chest, so near his beautiful heart. Anthony had gripped him with one hand, staring at him in horror and disbelief, attempting to speak as blood filled his mouth. Anthony was truly gone now, flung by Augustuv over the yacht's railing into the icy, pounding waves.

I - I remember now. At that horrible moment my mind simply *shattered*. I lunged at my husband, blinded by rage and grief, my hands going for his throat. But he was quick, stopping me cold with a knee to my solar plexus. I dropped like a stone to the deck floor, gasping for breath. Augustuv towered above me, snarling that he would not hesitate to make good on his threat to kill Abigail, and before my very eyes. I remember it had broken me, and I tearfully promised I would stay with him - let him do anything - as long as he swore to me that he would not harm Abigail. With a triumphant smirk, he agreed. It was then that I must have lost consciousness.

"Nimue, darling... let's get upstairs. I think you need to lie down." I hear Augustuv-Magnus' smooth voice behind me, drawing me out of those painful memories. I turn to face him, seeing my reflection in a mirror behind him. I am wearing a frilly lime green blouse tucked into a long black skirt, with a silk choker bearing three fiery opals wrapped around my throat. My earrings, a gift from him, are entwined golden snakes biting each other's tails. I barely recognize myself.

My husband approaches me, placing the back of his hand against my forehead to check my temperature. Then with a mischievous smile, he sweeps me off my feet, carrying me upstairs bridal style. We pass maids going about their everyday duties until coming finally to what will be our shared bedchamber.

A maid, keeping her head down, opens the double doors to reveal the elegant room to my startled eyes. My husband puts me down and I step fully into the room, gazing about me. There is a black marble fireplace - a fire already roaring within it - and an ornate desk near the large windows, which are bedecked with crimson curtains embroidered with iris petals and peacock feathers. I notice the large queen-sized bed with a canopy matching the curtains, sweeping downward to spread around the bed.

Augustuv's arms wrap around my waist from behind and I stiffen slightly. I will my body to relax for the sake of my act... or was it even an act anymore? I realize that a darker part of me - another persona unnamed - enjoys the pleasurable pain he gives me. He places his lips against my ear.

"Our wedding anniversary is in a few days' time. Coincidence, isn't it, that the day we married was the same day you seduced and killed my father," he muses, reminiscing about the man who had raised him. "But that is the past. There is no point in dwelling on it."

He slips away from me, and I turn, cursing myself internally as I call him back before he steps out of the bedchamber into the corridor. "Augustuv?"

He stops, holding the door frame with one hand as he turns back to me. "Yes, darling? Is something wrong?" he asks, uncharacteristic concern rising in his voice. I lick my lips and open my mouth to speak, but I merely shut it again as I come to the realization that I don't know what to say to him.

He sighs softly, closing the door and quietly approaching me. He takes my hand and leads me over to the edge of the bed. His hands come up to unwrap the silk choker from around my neck; he places it on the desk. I bring up my own hands to help him remove his suit. "No - don't say anything or do anything," he says, shushing me when I attempt to ask why. "Tonight is about me giving you pleasure, my sweet darling Nimue." He gently pushes me down onto the bed and with a tender smile, begins to peel off the rest of my clothing.

I never could have expected this to happen.

Augustuv-Magnus, holding me in his arms as he slowly, gently moves me up and down, *making love to me* in such a tender yet sensuous way. I cradle the back of his head with one hand to sift through his soft, silky hair, my other arm round his shoulders as he kisses and licks at my throat, softly grunting. I feel his cock slip in and out with every thrust, and it is delicious. Tilting my head back, breathless moans escape my lips and my eyes flutter closed. I am trying to understand, through the mists of pleasure, why he is being so gentle and loving with me. It is so unlike him. But truly, I am not complaining. I had forgotten what it feels like to be treated this way, and I am loving it.

He falls back onto the black silk sheets, keeping me over him with his legs spread wide behind me and firmly grasping my hips. This gives him more power as he thrusts up into my body. With a whimper I sit up slightly, placing one hand on his chest and reaching the other back to grasp his thigh as I ride his cock. I can feel that exquisite tightening in my groin that tells me I am about to lose control of myself. The next few minutes are a blur of wanton moans and breathless gasps - from both of us - until finally my back arches and sparks shoot out from every nerve ending. I hear myself crying out his name in the stillness of the fire-lit bedchamber, in spite of my internal shame and horror. I should not be feeling like this with the man who has caused me such misery. But as my thighs clench tightly around his waist and the pressure within builds to an intense climax, I realize I simply cannot help it.

"AUGUSTUV!!!"

His body tenses beneath me as he releases a rush of warmth into me, grunting heavily with the effort, his hands never losing their tight grip on my hips. I am coming down from the dizzying high I've just experienced, whimpering through the aftershocks washing over me. I am soon collapsing into his arms; he catches me and lays me down on top of him. Our bodies are completely covered in a thick sheen of sweat, chests rising and falling with each labored breath. Our hearts soon resume their normal pace. I rest my head on his chest and feel him sift a hand through my now slightly damp hair. A disappointed groan escapes me when I feel him pull his now-softened cock from my insides. He lays me back down, reaching with his

free hand for a lukewarm cloth that has been soaking in a wash basin filled with water on the bedside table. After cleaning us both up, he tosses the soiled cloth into the wash basket near the adjoining bathroom door. His lips kiss my forehead gently, and he pulls the duvet cover up around us.

"Get some sleep, my darling. You will need it."

My mind barely registers those words as my eyes slip closed. As I drift off, I find myself thinking of my one visit to Venice years before. As a very young boy, my sweet younger sister Mischa and I accompanied our parents on a trip to the city to visit a distant relative. I remember we were fascinated and enchanted by the picturesque canals, in a way only young children can be.

Mischa...

For the first time since our wedding, I sink into a gentle sleep, with no nightmares to disturb me.

LOCATION: THE CITY OF REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

EARLY MORNING

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

Although it is early morning here in Reykjavik, it is still dark, with a pathway of a multitude of stars in the sky. I make breakfast for Lucien and Markus, the two little boys who had discovered me on the beach while they looked for sea shells to make necklaces. The problem was, when they had asked "What is your name, mister?", I had tried to recall it but could not remember. So they had named me Dimitri.

As I fry up scrambled eggs, cut sausages and sliced baby tomatoes, I hear the sound of running feet. "Morning, Dimitri!" Markus (the youngest) calls, running over to hug me lightly around the waist. Smiling down at the little one, I place the pan at the back of the cooker, as our breakfast is now ready to eat. I ruffle my hand through Markus' hair as Lucien sets out three plates, cutlery, three glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice, and a cup of hot coffee for me. Truth be told, both of the boys have become like sons to me.

I remind myself that I must write down the fractured dream (or was it a memory?) I had had last night in my large black notebook, as I had been instructed by Dr. Grímsson, the man who had diagnosed me with a serious case of amnesia shortly after my arrival. "Let's get some breakfast, shall we?" I say, indicating to Markus that it is time to sit down at the breakfast table. He reluctantly lets go of me and takes his seat, smiling and chatting animatedly with

his brother, who is already seated. I bring the frying pan to the table and place the delicious-smelling food on the three plates.

Switching the cooker off, I pull back a chair and sit down, reaching for the newspaper on the table. But I quickly drop it when agonizing pain shoots through my head and a strange scene appears in front of my eyes. It plays out before me like the beginnings of a Greek play.

Smoke slithers across the sand of a large Greek outdoor theatre. A figure clad in a toga and wearing a mask of sorrow, a solitary tear running down its white cheek, emerges from the smoke and holds out its hand to me. It whispers these words:

"Cerca trova, my Orpheus. Cerca trova."

The mysterious figure then begins to walk back, disappearing into the smoke. I run after it and reach out desperately toward it, only to stumble forward. The smoke creeps in, closer and closer, until it completely envelopes me.

I feel small hands on my arms and suddenly snap back to reality. Lucien and Markus have grasped my arms, gazing at me with worry on their little faces. I smile at them awkwardly, feeling a slight strain in the muscles of my mouth. I manage to convince them that I am fine for now. "Right, let's get you two off to school, yeah?" I say, a little too brightly. They clear the plates away and wash them, glancing at me occasionally with continued concern, as I finish off my coffee. But in my mind I admit - I am worried too.

LOCATION: UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI FIRENZE

LATE MORNING

WILL'S P.O.V.

The University of Florence campus is bustling with allocated groups of students moving hither and yon, to and from their classes. I lean against the archway alcove of a long open hallway, Winston at my side. I am wearing an off-shoulder lilac top, a crimson designer hunter coat, and a black leather skirt. My clip-on tights are adorned with ruffles in the shape of sweet williams.

I don't usually smoke. But today I am nervous, and in my hand is a lit cigarette in an ochre cigarette holder. I bring it up to my lips and take a drag off it, blowing white wreaths of smoke into the fine, cool air of the morning. I at last see Abigail, alone and keeping her head down as she makes her way down the hall. She passes near to where I am standing.

"Abigail!" I call out, drawing her attention. She turns her face and halts, staring at me with wide, and for some reason frightened, eyes. She doesn't notice Winston, who has trotted over

to her, tail wagging happily.

"Abigail, I know you're afraid Coquille may be keeping tabs on you. But please, tell me - where has he gone?"

"I - I don't know. I'm sorry, Will."

My conversation with Abigail in the back of my mind, I walk through the large train station to the outdoor platform with Winston on a lead. He keeps himself close to my side. There is a handful of people waiting for the next train, so I head over to an empty bench and sit down.

Winston clambers up onto the bench and settles down with his head on my lap. I scratch him lightly between the ears in an effort to calm myself. I note a group of yobbish drunken youths who are also waiting for the train. Their leader, noticing how I am dressed, is leering over at me.

Ignoring him, I think of my meeting with Abigail at the university. I had taken the opportunity to escort her to her art class; I hadn't seen her in so very long, and I miss her. I feel as though I have lost the girl who seems like a daughter to myself and Hannibal, all because of that rat Coquille.

Hannibal.

Even thinking about him now brings back wistful memories of the times we had spent together - kissing and making love; enjoying the company of Anthony, sweet and gentle *Anthony...*

The sudden sound of Winston snarling low in his throat brings me quickly out of my thoughts. I glance up and see the group of unruly youths is now standing in front of me. Their leader, his hair slicked back with too much hair gel, continues to leer at me. I look around for a nearby police officer and spot instead the person I've been seeking as she rises from where she has been sitting on another bench - Bedelia DuMaurier. I am just about to get up and approach her when I'm abruptly grabbed and hauled off the bench by the leader. Winston leaps from the bench and begins snarling and barking at them, fiercely baring his teeth.

One of the fools goes in for a kick at Winston, and I see red. I quickly twist out of the leader's grip by hitting him hard in the stomach with my elbow. I lunge at the man threatening Winston and kick him heavily in the groin. He gives a pained grunt and sinks down onto his knees. I spit on him and turn to run after Bedelia, intent on leaving the platform and heading into the main station.

I never reach my destination. I hear a sudden yelp of pain from Winston, who had been following close behind. I turn to him and out of nowhere feel hands shoving me backward into free space. I can hear screams and shouts of shock and horror as my body abruptly jolts before it hits the rails. I have landed on the train tracks, and there is a train arriving any minute.

Dazed, terrified, bleeding and in pain, I look up to see a large man with a fierce face and a scar on his lip. A black woman is standing next to him, one hand holding Winston on his lead as she keeps the other hand on his shoulder. This and her unfocused gaze tell me that she is blind. The man reaches down and hauls me back onto the platform with such astonishing strength I have to grip both of his muscular shoulders for support. He kneels beside me, then turns his head and shoots a baleful glare at the drunken ruffians. All of them visibly flinch, eyes wide with fear, and immediately scatter in different directions.

"Are you all right?" he asks me, his deep voice rumbling in a way that reminds me of a dragon. I try to move, but sharp pain shoots through my ankle and I cry out. Winston whimpers in sympathy.

"I... OW!... Dammit, I think the fall twisted my ankle," I pant out. He nods in reply and helps me up, making sure I keep my weight off the injured ankle as much as possible. I gratefully retrieve Winston's lead from the woman and thank her as articulately as I can. She smiles, nods, and says softly, "Of course." She then links arms with the man, who has his other arm around my shoulders to support me as I hobble at his side wincing in pain, my arm around his waist. Winston keeps to my side, looking up at me with concern in his eyes. We pass Bedelia standing in the archway of the station; no doubt she had been watching all that had transpired.

She neither looks at me nor acknowledges that she has seen me. To her mind I no longer exist, ever since I had disappeared from Baltimore to find Hannibal.

Francis Dolarhyde and Reba McClane are the names of the couple who had helped me. Winston and I now sit in the back of their car, which is outfitted with a retractable roof. I watch the view whizzing by as a fresh breeze ruffles my curls, which have grown slightly longer.

Winston has his head in my lap again, feeling very protective and possessive of me. He emits quiet snuffles every now and then as soft music plays on the radio. A small picture of William Blake's painting *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed With the Sun* is affixed to the dashboard. Reba is telling me the story of how she and Francis met.

Chapter End Notes

Cerca trova - "Seek and ye shall find" (Greek)

A Multitude of Sins

Chapter Summary

> Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
>
> - 1 Peter 4:8

LOCATION - ON THE ROAD TO STAVANGER, NORWAY

WILL GRAHAM'S P.O.V.

Francis Dolarhyde was a killer.

More of a retired one now, though, as many of the murders he had committed had been overshadowed by those of a new killer -"*Buffalo Bill."* Just before Francis and Reba had left for Florence, they had heard that "Bill" had been found and killed by a new prodigy of Jack Crawford's - Agent Clarice Starling.

As for Agent Miriam Lass, she was still missing and was assumed to be the last victim of the Chesapeake Ripper, at least according to the profoundly annoying Freddie Lounds of the tabloid website *TattleCrime.com*. Hannibal had told me she had seen his picture of the Wound Man, and he had been at war with himself over whether or not to get rid of her so she wouldn't tell Jack. But something about her, he said, had reminded of him of his sister - Mischa - about whom he had asked me not to make any further inquiries.

It was too painful for him to talk about, he had said at the time; I had been in his office, talking with him about parenthood. I still believed then that Abigail was dead, having not yet discovered that she was still alive. Thankfully she was, but the events of that night when she pushed me out of the window still haunted me. I had tried to ask Abigail what had made her do it when I saw her in Florence.

She never answered me, changing the subject instead.

"Pearl-Lace, I'm wondering....this Coquille. What's his first name?" Francis asks me, pulling me out of my thoughts. He is looking at me via my reflection in the rear view mirror above the dashboard. I wonder, does he somehow know the vile snake, or something regarding his past?

"Augustuv-Magnus. Do you know him?" I reply. He swallows, and Reba places a hand over his to calm and reassure him that everything is all right, and they can trust me.

"You could say, we go a long way back. Childhood friends. Augustuv always got what he wanted, no matter what it was. He was adept at using blackmail against his targets, or *prey*, he called them." Francis begins to talk, and with a nod I encourage him to continue. "He ruined so many lives. Destroyed relationships between people, and yet, love was something he was never able to achieve for himself. We drifted apart after the murder of his father. I never heard from him again until last year, when he called to ask me to come to the wedding between himself and Nimue-Lurisa Venomis, or Hannibal - your lover."

"He is...*vile*. He....Will you help me, Francis? Reba? Help me save Nimue?" I plead, feeling tears start to sting my eyes. He closes the retractable roof after pulling the car into a lay-by, where on either side fields of golden wheat sway in the breeze.

He turns in the driver's seat to look at me sitting mournfully in the back seat. I feel him take hold of one of my hands as Reba takes the other. Both of them nod in reply to what I had asked, pulling me into an awkward yet gentle hug. Winston sits up and puts his head on my shoulder.

*"Of course. It's been a while since the **Great Red Dragon** has hunted, but I think entangling with the Coiling Serpent that Coquille is will be a fight to be remembered."*

"Thank you. Thank you."

*"Love is strong when there is such a bond as there is between the two of you. When you speak of Hannibal in his **Nimue persona,** you show your heart and what you are feeling. Draw on that strength and use it. And all four of us - maybe even when we find your third lover - Mr. Dimmond - then the five of us can stand up to him."*

"Thank you, Reba. Thank you so much for your kindness."

LOCATION - COQUILLE'S VENETIAN RESIDENCE

EARLY MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Soft, warm sunlight filters through a gap in the large curtains of our shared bedchamber, shining down onto the queen-sized bed. I lie there basking it its warmth when I feel a gentle kiss at the nape of my neck as Augustuv sleepily awakens beside me. I murmur a soft

"*Hmmm"* as he kisses his way down my spine, then comes back up again to nuzzle his nose affectionately against my cheek.

Still sleepy myself, I turn my face to look at him and he pulls me into a gentle kiss, moving his lips against mine as he cradles the back of my head. He sifts his hand through my hair, still slightly damp from.....*our lovemaking*.....last night. After a moment he pulls back, moving his hand to stroke my cheekbone with the back of his knuckles.

It is so tender, loving and caring, I...feel tears forming before I can stop myself. I bring my hands up to wipe them away. He watches me with a frown.

"Nimue, sweetheart? What's wrong? Why are you....Are you crying?" he asks me, pulling my hands away from my eyes, then cupping both my cheeks. I roll over to lie on my back and try to answer, only to bury my face into the crook of his neck.

"*I'm.....Augustuv....hold me,"* I reply, feeling him wrap his arms around me and entangling his legs with mine. He whispers soothing words in my ear, and the tension seeps out of my body.

He lifts his head, kissing my cheek lightly, then slips out of bed and heads into the bathroom. I lie there, the duvet cover around my waist, still trying to understand why he is acting like this and listening to the water running. Stretching myself luxuriously, I can still feel a residual ache down below, while the wetness of his cum trickles lightly down the inside of my thighs.

Slipping out of bed myself, I enter the bathroom where he is looking at himself in the mirror and sighing wistfully. I see that he has taken off his wedding ring. He turns to face me, smiling softly.

"I feel like going out today. There is a lovely cafe I would like to show you, and of course, I will take you to where you'll be working at the Gallerie dell'Accademia. It seems they have lost one of their curators due to some...unfortunate events," he says, slipping the ring back on and coming up to me. He takes hold of me by the hips as we both stand in the bathroom doorway.

"Augustuv.....I.....What is this?....Why?.....Why are you doing this for...*me*?" I ask him, completely bewildered. He smiles mischievously and leads me back into the bedroom, walking me backwards until I fall onto the bed with him over me. He gazes down at me as he places his hands on either side of my head.

"Don't you know why?" he asks. I shake my head and he smiles another strange, soft smile. He bends his head down to place his lips against my ear, his breath hot against my cheek.
"I...love you, my sweet, darling Nimue***. I...love you."***

My heart skips a beat, followed by a choking gasp.*"What!!?....You!!?....I....You....love me!!?"* I try in vain to comprehend what he has just confessed. I start to hyperventilate heavily. He slips off the bed and goes to the bedside table, where he produces a sedative to help calm me down.

Seeing him fetch the medication makes me aware that I'm panicking. I breathe deeply in and out to calm myself, bringing my hands up to sift through my hair. At last my heart rate slows

and returns to normal.

"Nimue, look at me," Augustuv implores. I lower my hands and see him leaning over me. He takes hold of my hand with the ring on it - the fiery opal shaped like a snake's eye - and kisses my knuckles gently, one by one.

"Sorry. I.....just.....it's just the fact that our wedding anniversary is coming up in three days."

And the fact that...I may never be able to escape from you.

"That's all right. We're newlyweds still in some people's eyes. For me, you are...the most beautiful and brilliant thing to ever happen in my life."

He bends his head down, keeping my left hand clasped in his right close to his chest, while the sunlight makes the rings on our fingers glint in beautiful warm tones. He kisses me on the lips, and I find myself kissing him back.

Whatever is this?

Why am I kissing him back?

Why doesn't my heart feel like it should be shattering into a thousand fragile china-like pieces?

Why?

The Fiery Trial

Chapter Summary

> Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.
>
> - 1 Peter 4:12

LOCATION - STAVANGER, ON THE SOUTHWESTERN COAST OF NORWAY

LATE AFTERNOON

WILL GRAHAM'S P.O.V.

I must have fallen asleep again, for Francis is shaking me gently to wake me. I flutter my eyes open to see we have arrived at their home in Stavanger after an entire day's journey. Down below is the harbour where I can see a large private large yacht called the ***Sadeh*** docked in the distance. A shiver shoots down my spine as I receive a strange premonition...***Nimue*** is on it.

"Coquille's yacht," says Francis, confirming my suspicions. I step out the car and and head with Winston up the stone pathway to their garden. I peer down at the view from the front garden wall, thinking about Hannibal. Reba comes out of the house carrying three glasses of cold drinks over the well-kept lawn.

I thank her for the drink, taking a sip of the cool iced lemonade while sitting on the garden wall, watching Winston running and playing happily with Francis and Reba's dogs - Chilo, Mafo and Cochila. I place the tumbler down with a sigh. I just want to have Hannibal and Anthony back.

"If you met Coquille again, what would you do?" I ask Francis, who has lit a cigarette. He takes a drag from it and blows a wreath of smoke into the air, keeping one arm over his chest.

"It depends on what *he* would do. Augustuv has two sides to him - the ***Coiled Snake*** that lies under his skin, and - ***The Illustrious Blackmailer*** - who appears when he needs information about something. I know of one other person's life he ruined a long time in Monaco - Jean-Luc "Le Chiffre" Lecter - who is his ex-husband and, I believe, Hannibal's brother," Francis replies. I look at him, shocked. I had never known Hannibal had a brother, much less that he had been married to Coquille. Could this situation get any stranger?

"How I can get in contact with this man?" I ask him. He points down to another yacht called the ***Cassiopeia***, docked close to a casino. Francis watches as my troubled gaze shifts back and forth between the two yachts.

"He owns a casino here. I can get you into the casino, but to get close to Le Chiffre I'm afraid you'll have to find a way to do that yourself. He will surely see me as a threat to him. What Augustuv did to him has made him deeply distrustful of most people. It seems the only person he truly trusts is his daughter Svetlana, adopted of course," Francis replies. I pick the tumbler back up and finish off the lemonade, my mind racing.

LOCATION - STAVANGER, NORWAY

THE KOMODO DRAGON CASINO

NIGHT TIME

WILL GRAHAM'S P.O.V.

The long gold and black kimono dress that I'm wearing, embroidered with a Chinese dragon and sweet williams and splitting apart at the waist on either side, hugs my figure tightly, accentuating every detail and garnering appreciative glances as I calmly stroll into the Chinese-styled casino. It is elegantly designed, with bridges going across an arena where the titular Komodo dragons laze about, tongues flicking in the air as they scent their territory.

I soon spot Jean-Luc Le Chiffre at one of the poker tables, clad in a stylish black suit. One hand rests on his temple in a way that some people would call his *"tell."* I head over to the bar and sit down on one of the stools, calmly crossing one leg over the other and ordering a drink.

Seeing how Le Chiffre looks so like Hannibal makes my chest ache at the thought of the man I love, knowing he had just been on the ***Sadeh*** in the clutches of Augustuv-Magnus Coquille.

Svetlana, Le Chiffre's adopted daughter, approaches the bar. She is wearing a shimmery silver cocktail dress, her short blonde hair slicked back in a sophisticated style. She flicks her gaze over to me, taking in every detail, as I reach for my drink which has just arrived.

Without warning my hand begins to shake violently. Through a fog I can feel the tumbler slipping slowly from my hand, smashing into a hundred tinkling shards of glass on the casino floor. Everyone turns, startled, to look at me. I try to get up from the bar stool, but my legs give out beneath me, my vision going in and out of focus. Just then a pair of arms catches me, and I look up to see it is Le Chiffre who has caught me.

"*....Help.....Hannibal.....Coquille.....The* ***Sadeh.....****across....from your.....yacht....."*

I try to tell him everything, only for my words to come out slurred and broken. I strain to keep my eyes open, but it is as if a heavy weight has been placed upon them as darkness sweeps in like raven's wings, obliterating my vision completely.

I remember nothing thereafter.

If I Make My Bed in Hell

Chapter Summary

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?
or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:
if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

- Psalm 139:7-8

CW: Attempted sexual assault.
New OC - Gregor Drukov - Augustuv-Magnus' Cousin

LOCATION - REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

MENNTASKOLINN VID HAMRAHLID (PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL)

Anthony Dimmond's P.O.V.

"Lucien, you sure you got everything? All right. We'll see you when school is out."

Lucien nods and runs to the main school gates as the bell rings, waving back to Markus and I. Due to medical complications from the traumatic car accident that had claimed the lives of their parents and injured Markus, I am keeping him home from school today. Shifting him up more securely onto my hip, I begin to walk back to where I parked the car.

After placing Markus into the carrier seat and strapping him in safely, I hear a frightened yip. I look back and see a large dilapidated Land Rover speeding off, leaving a small dog lying trembling on the road. I race over to check it.

A whimper comes from the poor animal, a Chow, when I kneel beside it to check for injuries, trying to ascertain where it had been hurt. A shadow suddenly covers me. I look up to see a man with a grizzled beard and slightly slicked back hair.

"Do you need some help?" he asks me, kneeling down as I nod silently. Slipping his large hands under the body of the Chow, he carries it over to the car while telling me his name is

Gregor Drukov and that he is a doctor. He had been traveling around the city that morning, making some house calls.

Placing the dog in the back seat, I see the Chow has a metal tag on his collar. I reach for it to check the name..... "***Pepilo".*** Abruptly, sharp pain shoots through my head. I gasp and grip the tag in both hands as I begin to shudder profoundly. Gently, Gregor loosens my hands and cups my cheeks, lifting up my face as he whispers to me.

I can't hear whatever he is saying to me. It sounds muffled, like I'm under water. I vaguely feel him lead me around to the passenger side, where he checks my temperature with the back of his hand. He lifts my wrist and checks my pulse.

"I'm going to drive, all right? We will get the Chow to a friend of mine. He is a vet - Randall Tier. The dog can be patched up, and then I'll take you to my office for a checkup, all right?" he asks me as I weakly nod in reply. Settling back into the passenger seat, I feel a tiny hand - little Markus' hand - reach for mine, squeezing it lightly to reassure me everything is all right and I will be okay.

---

14 DAYS LATER

"Umm....I never got to thank you for helping me with Pepilo. Thank you, Dr. Drukov, and to your friend as well."

"That's all right. And call me Gregor, please? Only my more expensive patients call me Dr. Drukov."

We both chuckle lightly at this as he pours two snifters of brandy. He hands me one of them as I sit on the soft-cushioned sofa in his small, homely office which is part of his relatively simple house, with a fire crackling in the fireplace. On the mantelpiece are photographs of him on trips, awards he's been given, and another photo that shows him standing with another man and a young woman in a wheelchair, all of them smiling for the camera.

He sits down beside me, heaving a sigh of relief at finally being able to relax after a long day. He notices me looking at the photograph, taking an idle sip of his brandy as he rests one arm on the back of the sofa behind my head.

"Svetlana - adopted daughter of Le Chiffre, the prominent accountant who works in Stavanger, Norway, and his ex-husband Mr. Augustuv-Magnus Coquille," he says, pointing at the man next to him in the photo. Seeing the face of this man more clearly drags me back without warning into that Greek play-like world once more.

The mist has returned.

It writhes and swirls across the sand of the outdoor theatre. I stumble forward and collapse onto the sand, gasping laboriously as blood begins to seep out beneath my body from the wound I had been given.

It spreads out in a crimson pool while something slithers in the smoke around me. At last it reveals itself - a giant inky black snake with piercing amber eyes.

It slithers its heavy body toward me, wrapping itself around me and constricting its muscles strongly. I place my hands on its scaly body, trying in vain to free myself from its choking grasp, only for it to tighten it more.

My back arches heavily, pain blossoming in the form of sharp crimson lightning shooting through my body again and again - as if I'm being struck over and over. Suddenly the serpent's grip loosens as a low growling noise is heard. Weakened from my struggle, I turn to see a large creature emerging stealthily from the shadows...a mongoose.

The black snake flings my body to one side and I roll across the sand, hitting a half-buried rock with a sickening thud. The large mongoose begins to fight with the giant snake.

My heart wants the mongoose to win. I lay spent on the sand in a tunic now fully stained with crimson. Abruptly another noise reaches my ears, and I turn my face to the dark sky.

Spreading wings glide effortlessly through the air as an otherworldly humanoid being descends toward me. Hands reach beneath my body, cradling me close to a warm, muscular chest. My vision is weak, but I can see that half of their face is that of a strange woman I think I recognize. I slump into an unconscious state as they fly away carrying my limp body, leaving the mongoose to fight the snake, who hisses in anger at my escape.

The vision leaves me and I return to consciousness, sweating and disoriented. I find I am stretched out on the sofa, and Gregor is wetting a cloth in a bowl of water. He begins to dab my forehead gently, the coolness of the water making me moan softly with relief. My shirt is unbuttoned slightly and my hair is mussed up. He leans over me, dabbing my neck as well. Then he stills, gazing down at me with a strange look in his eyes.

"Dr...Drukov....Gregor...What's....wro...." I begin to say, only for his lips to suddenly smash into mine as he lifts me up in his arms and carries me over to a fold-down bed in a corner of the room.

He lays me down and clambers over me, still kissing me heavily at the same time hands begin to slip under my clothes. I struggle to free myself as memories of someone else holding me, kissing me and making love to me are flashing before my eyes in fractured and frightening ways.

He grabs both my cheeks, holding them tightly as he continues to kiss me, forcing his tongue into my mouth and attempting to coax my tongue to entwine with his. I whimper pitifully but he pays my distress no heed. He has been unbuttoning my shirt all the while, and he finally

releases my bruised lips and travels downward, licking, sucking and biting. My hands scar the leather of the sofa as I grip it in fear.

"Gre...Gregor!!!?....Don't....I can't....." I manage to protest, pushing him up by his shoulders in an effort to free myself. I start to move away but he grabs me around the waist from behind, cupping me between my thighs so strongly that I find myself clenching unexpectedly at the action.

I grab his hand and try to pull it away, but Gregor starts to rub that hand up and down in such a way that to my shame, I can feel myself slowly becoming aroused. Emboldened, he slips his hand further upward to unbuckle my belt.

The clinking of it, sounding loud to my ears, snaps me out of the fog of arousal. I struggle to get free but he only grips me tighter, constricting my movements. I find myself slumping in his grasp, trembling as he unbuttons my jeans.

He grabs my chin hard with his free hand, nails digging into my cheeks and drawing tiny beads of blood. He turns my head so I look into his cold, harsh and unforgiving eyes. I slump further, pretending to finally submit to him, and he lets go of my chin with a satisfied smirk. I feel something rising within me and I lunge forward, grabbing his tongue with my teeth - hard.

I rip into it, hearing a guttural cry of shock and rage as he lets go of me completely. I leap from the bed and manage to grab hold of an ornate samurai sword on display near the bed in an open cabinet, entwined snakes biting each other's tails on the handle. I straddle him and, lifting the sword high above me with both hands, stab down into his chest. He lets out a pained grunt as I press it deeper into him until I am stabbing straight through his body and the bed beneath him.

"See.....See.....what you have...been made into? Don't you...see....it?..." he grunts, spitting a wad of phlegm onto the carpet and breathing heavily. Still holding the hilt tightly with both hands, I bend my head down so we are properly eye level.

"See....what? See.....that....I've already.....got a monster within me? You have been especially.....***rude....***dear Gregor Drukov," I hear myself say in a disembodied voice which doesn't resemble my own at all....more like a combination of two other people from my fractured memories mixed with my own.

His eyes widen, and I pull the samurai sword out, allowing a fountain of crimson to spurt up into the air and fully cover me until it stops.

After cleaning up the evidence of what had transpired and disposing of Gregor Drukov's body, I sit on the beach listening to the murmur of the waves washing back and forth over the

shingles. *"Shhhsh.....shhhhsh...."* I watch Pepilo playing football with Lucien and Markus in the surf, yipping delightfully every time the football is thrown.

I'm sitting on the warm beach sand, feeling a strange sense of calm even though I had just murdered someone. But something told me it wasn't the first time I had done this. Reaching for the black notebook, I begin to sketch quietly with the charcoal I had brought from the art shop.

I don't know what I'm drawing at the moment, just moving the charcoal fluidly across the rough, coarse paper, until finally a face begins to form from the blackness of the charcoal. I see I have drawn the face of a person - one side female and the other male. The eyes of this strange creature seem to stare deeply into my soul. There is a hint of wings with curved talons on them.

"Dimitri, what's that you've drawn?" I hear Lucien asking me. I lift my head up to see him looking down at what I have sketched with the charcoal. He sits down next to me on the sand as Markus runs over to me. I hand the drawing to the older boy.

Markus falls into my arms, giggling when I fall backwards onto the sand with a muffled thump. I feel Peplio, who has come around to check on me, give me a slobbering lick on my cheek and I protest in mock indignation.

Life is good.

Come, My Beloved

Chapter Summary

I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.

Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages.

Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves.

- Song of Solomon 7:10-12

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

PIAZZA SAN MARCO

LATE MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Augustuv-Magnus and I have spent a delightful morning in the historic, colorful Piazza San Marco district of Venice. This is the tourist hub of the city, and the square is a buzzing hive of activity. The weather is fair, the echoes of the city's past immense, and the air is filled with the tempting aromas of delicious food and coffee from nearby cafes and restaurants. The architecture here is astounding - St. Mark's Basilica, the Campanile, the Torre dell'Orologio, the Doge's Palace, the Porta della Carta, the Biblioteca Marciana. I long to roam through the Museo Correr and immerse myself in its collections of Italian art and culture. My husband, however, is intent on showering me with expensive gifts, and I must admit it's nice to be pampered for a change.

The Versace shop is a highlight of our shopping expedition. I acquire four new dresses, my favorite being a long sleeved draped midi in fluorescent blue viscose, with an asymmetrical neckline and a split up the side that comes up nearly to my hip bone (Augustuv is especially fond of that detail). I am also thrilled to be finally visiting the flagship store of my favorite lingerie brand, La Perla. I can sense Augustuv becoming aroused as we wander through the shop, pointing out this or that bra, those knickers, that babydoll, this bustier (while discreetly fondling each item) that he imagines I would look especially nice in. Of course, we end up buying them all. I am especially enchanted by a long sleeved off-white see-through maxi dress of embroidered tulle and chiffon, featuring a plunging neckline and corset lacing in the

back. "Much too daring to wear in public," he murmurs into my ear from behind, caressing my waist, "but for an intimate evening at home with me...why not?"

After visiting several jewelry boutiques and adding more earrings, necklaces and bracelets to my collection, we make our way to the cafe he is eager to introduce me to. The Creme de Flouff Cafe is a charming little bistro tucked away from the main bustle of the square. We enter and are greeted immediately by a bearded, rather stocky gentleman with reddish hair and enormous black square-framed glasses. He is smartly dressed in pinstripe gray trousers and waistcoat and a black button-down, sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

"Ah, Mr. Coquille, how nice to see you again," he says with a smile and a Scottish accent. He turns to me and cocks his head to one side. "And who might this lovely lass be?" he asks. I cannot help but blush; it's been a very long time since anyone has thought me young and lovely. He seems vaguely familiar to me...

My husband smiles and also turns to me. "Darling, may I present Mr. Cain Midian, the manager of the Creme de Flouff and my employee. You see," he adds almost apologetically, "I own this cafe. Mr. Midian, please meet my wife, Nimue."

Midian's eyebrows shoot up and he beams with delight. "Ah, this is your wife! We meet at last! It's a pleasure, Mrs. Coquille. Congratulations," he finishes with a little bow.

He shows us to our private table, ensconced in a corner behind a lovely Chinese screen painted with snakes and dragons. We decide we will both have the lemon tarragon salmon with Greek salad, and a bottle of pinot noir. Midian pours the wine and heads off to the kitchen, and we are alone.

We chat easily about the events of the day. I admit I am still feeling rather strange around him after his confession of love, and what that might mean for my future. Augustuv is smiling warmly at me, holding my hand in his own. "I simply cannot wait to see you in that lingerie, my dear. I know you will look...*ravishing*," he purrs. With a faintly predatory look in his eye, he releases my hand and places it on my thigh, stroking and caressing. The hand makes its way beneath my blue linen skirt, smoothing over my silk stockings and creeping slowly ever higher up my thigh. He is still smiling but catches his bottom lip in his teeth as his desire grows.

I blush nervously and take a sip of my wine. "Now, Augustuv. Let's not get too carried away; we haven't even eaten yet," I chide gently. "And in spite of the modicum of privacy here, remember we *are* in public."

He leans closer to me, his eyes roving over my face. "There could be no more delicious meal in all of Venice than that which is right here before me at this very moment," he murmurs, taking my hand beneath the table and placing it against the impressive bulge in his trousers. His pupils grow wide and he whispers:

"I could just eat you right up."

Flustered, I try to think of how I could possibly answer that when Mr. Midian saves the day, returning at that moment to our table with our meals. My husband frees my hand and tries to

look nonchalant as he straightens his clothing. I glance up gratefully at Midian with a smile, which he returns, and once again I am struck by the thought that I have seen this man before. But where? He tops up our wine glasses and gracefully withdraws.

Our lunch is incredibly delicious, and we finish it with some decadent chocolate-pistachio tartufo, perhaps the best I've ever had in my travels. My husband strokes my knee with his free hand throughout the meal, his intense gaze rarely leaving me. The combination of his amorous regard, the exquisite food, and the positively ambrosial wine sends warmth coursing through my veins and straight into my groin and cock. I hold his gaze for many moments after our meal is finished. At last he brings his hand back up and onto my shoulder, slowly smoothing it down my arm.

"You know, darling, I haven't given you the official tour yet. There is a wonderful banquet room down the hall that you would not expect to find in a small establishment like this," he murmurs. "I would like to show it to you. There are many fine paintings on the walls that I know an art lover such as yourself would greatly appreciate." He smiles in such a mischievous way that I cannot help but smile back.

"Why, Mr. Coquille," I say coquettishly, tilting my head and batting my eyelashes. "Are you asking me to come up and see your etchings?"

He stands, takes my hand and almost yanks me from my seat. "I most certainly am," he mutters. He leads me swiftly down a back hallway to an elegantly carved door, his free hand digging into his pocket for the key. After a comical bit of fumbling, the door is finally opened, then closed and locked after us.

The room is dim, but I can see four long tables arranged in a square. There are chairs are stacked up in a corner. My husband wastes no time in backing up against a table edge and kissing me fiercely, his hands wandering over my body. He presses his erection against mine, and we both groan. "Shhh," he whispers. "We must try to be quiet if we can. But I don't know if I can," he adds desperately. He grapples with the zipper of my skirt, at last unzipping me and pushing my skirt down to the floor with an impatient huff. He drops to his knees and with no finesse or attempt at seduction, yanks my stockings and knickers down in one quick motion and sucks my cock into his hot mouth without preamble, his hands kneading the flesh of my buttocks.

I lean back, propping myself up with my hands on the table's surface. My lead lolls back and my eyes close as I revel in the sensations. My brain must be a bit fuzzy from the wine, for I have no trouble imagining it is my darling Will on his knees before me, doing unspeakable things with his mouth and tongue. Or perhaps it is my sweet Anthony, his tongue pressing against my frenulum as electricity shoots through my body. It takes every ounce of my resolve not to whisper their names.

Augustuv abruptly pulls back and stands. I whimper softly at the loss of contact. He reaches into his suit jacket pocket, breathing heavily, and removes a small bottle of lube, placing it on the table. Then he is almost frantically removing his jacket, trousers and boxers, his eyes never leaving my face. Instinctively I pull myself up onto the table, lie back and begin to unbutton my white linen blouse. I start to kick off my white leather pumps, but he stops me.

"No - please, darling Nimue, leave them on," he whispers. I smile, reach out and grab his tie, pulling him closer.

He is on top of me in an instant, kissing me deeply, his tongue twisting inside my mouth. I can taste myself on his lips, and my arousal flares into fire. He rises up, kneeling between my legs, and raises my legs onto his shoulders. He applies some lube to his hands, then guides the fingers of one hand between my buttocks and over my entrance. He smiles, letting one finger slide inside. I moan softly, trying so very hard to keep quiet. After a few moments the finger withdraws, and he slicks up both our cocks with more lube. Before I know it he is looming over me, my legs slipping down to tighten around his waist. Our eyes still locked, he begins to slowly enter me, bit by bit, filling me up so completely and so deliciously.

We move as one on that plain, utilitarian banquet table, passion and pleasure growing with each thrust. I dig the heels of my pumps into his buttocks, and he grunts in surprise and delight. He buries his face in my neck and I feel his hot breath on my skin.

"Oh God... Nimue my sweet... you are exquisite... I love you my darling... I love you," he pants in ecstasy.

I try to concentrate on the pleasure he is giving me, and not his words. But it is difficult. It has been so long since I have heard words of love spoken to me. I cannot honestly reply in kind, for I don't love him, and he knows this. But right now he is my only contact with the world, and it will be through him that I am reunited with my loves. I concentrate on my sweet Will and Anthony as the friction of his body on my cock hurtles me toward orgasm.

"Augustuv... you are incredible... oh God I'm cumming... yes...yes..."

And we both cum, almost simultaneously, each lost in our separate passions.

Truly This Is a Sickness

Chapter by UnknownMusing

Chapter Summary

> Woe is me, because of my injury! My wound is incurable.
> But I said, "Truly this is a sickness,
> And I must bear it."
>
> - Jeremiah 10:19

LOCATION - STAVANGER, NORWAY

THE *CASSIOPEIA*

EARLY MORNING

JEAN-LUC LE CHIFFRE'S P.O.V.

"*....Help.....Hannibal.....Coquille.....The* ***Sadeh.....****across....from your.....yacht.....*"

As I sit in the ornate chair near the guest sleeping cabin bed, these words echo and re-echo in my brain with harsh clarity. I realize now that my ex-husband Coquille is in Stavanger, a mere stone's throw from my yacht. The man who told me this shifts in the bed with a small pained moan. I turn my gaze away from the window to watch the young man slowly coming around.

Why is Will Graham from the F.B.I Behavioral Analysis Unit asking for my help?

Rising from the armchair, I approach the bed and sit down on its edge, leaning over him to stare at his beautiful face. I understand now why Hannibal - my brother - had been attracted to this man. His eyes flutter open to reveal sea blue-green eyes that look as though they could gaze deep into my soul and tell me everything about myself - even the painful moments of my past I didn't remember.

"How are you feeling? No, don't get up," I say, placing my hands on his shoulders and gently pressing him back down on the bed when he tries to rise up. I check his temperature with the

back of my hand. "You have a fever at the moment, so try to get some rest. May I ask you your name?"

"Pearl-Lace," he replies groggily. He says no more and burrows down further into the duvet cover. Understanding that he wants some time alone, I stand and prepare to leave. But a hand suddenly grabs my wrist, and I look down at him in shock and surprise.

"I need your help. Please, Le Chiffre.....I know you're separated from Coquille. But *please*.....help me save Hannibal from the man who is now *his* husband," he pleads. I sneer when he mentions the one person who I had truly believed loved me, and yet that love had turned into something else. Something unforgivable. I wrench my wrist free from his grasp.

"No. I will not. You have no idea.....*NO IDEA WHAT THAT SNAKE OF A MAN DID TO ME!!!*" I shout. The young man abruptly gets out of the bed, throwing the duvet cover onto the floor.

He steps close to me so we are at eye level.

He stares at me with defiance in his eyes. Those hauntingly beautiful, soulful eyes.

"Then....you're just a coward. Hiding away from the troubles of the world. When someone asks - no, *begs* - you for help, you say you will do nothing. Are you even *human*? Or has he made you so cold within yourself that no one can break the ice around your heart?" he asks. I see red. I grab him around the throat and slam him up against the cabin window, making it shudder slightly with the impact.

*"You....**dare** call me that. A **coward**? I have reasons for being what I am. Do you, Will Graham?"*

<u>WILL GRAHAM'S P.O.V.</u>

*"You....**dare** call me that. A **coward**? I have reasons for being what I am. Do you, Will Graham?"*

*"I....have reasons, yes. But....what I have as well...is **love** for Hannibal and Anthony. That is what I hold onto, what keeps me sane. You have it too. You hold onto the love you have for your daughter, Svetlana."*

The rage in Le Chiffre's eyes slowly begins to dissipate at the mention of his daughter. He releases me, chest heaving, then turns away and quickly removes an asthma inhaler from his jacket pocket. He takes several puffs, and gradually his breathing returns to normal. Replacing the inhaler, he walks to the window and gazes out of it, hands clasped behind his back.

"Yes... You are right. Svetlana is very dear to me. Without her love and support, I might be in a mental institution." He turns and looks at me. "But there are things you don't know, Mr. Graham. Things which I do not wish to revisit. It horrifies me to know that that serpent is right here, now, close to me. If I were to see him again, I am afraid I would not be responsible for my actions." A tiny drop of blood begins to seep from his clouded left eye, and he retrieves a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and gently wipes it away. He sighs, and then a determined look etches itself into his scarred features. "I love my brother dearly, Mr. Graham. But I will not place my mental health in jeopardy. Not even for him."

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

PIAZZA SAN MARCO

EARLY AFTERNOON

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

My husband and I stroll out of the Creme de Flouff Cafe in a post-coital haze. Mr. Midian sees us off with a bow and a knowing smirk. He undoubtedly knows what we had been up to in the banquet room. Anyone could tell, really. Our clothing are hair are slightly disheveled, our expressions misty and unfocused, and the lingering odor of sex hovers about us. We saunter arm in arm down the sidewalk in comfortable silence, not caring one whit what the world may think of us.

I am glad for the silence; it gives me time to think. Since Coquille's love confession, I have been conflicted regarding my feelings for him. The strong bond between myself, Anthony and Will prevents me from truly loving this man. Not to mention the cruelty he has inflicted upon me in the past. But I have to admit to myself that I have grown to care for him. He now seems truly devoted to me. I no longer feel as if I am in a prison. Perhaps I am, but it is a gilded cage, beautifully furnished for my comfort. Am I developing Stockholm Syndrome? Suddenly all I want is to see Will and Anthony again. Hold them close to me, kiss them, soak in their presence and their love. I feel a stab of longing in my heart, and find I am near tears.

My husband, seemingly oblivious to my distress, turns to me with a smile. "So, darling Nimue. Shall we visit the museum where you will be working? It's only the most prestigious art museum in the city, the Gallerie dell'Accademia. It is in the Dorsoduro district, so we will have to take the vaporetto."

Startled out of my thoughts, I look at him and try my best to smile. "The water bus? Oh my, that sounds grand. Yes, let's do that." My expression softens. "I am truly grateful to you, dear, for arranging this job for me. It means more to me than all the designer clothes in the world."

I squeeze his arm affectionately and slowly the sadness in my heart begins to fade. Best to make the most of this, I think.

Still smiling, he leans toward me and kisses my temple. "The only thing I desire in this whole wide world is to make you happy, my sweet Nimue. That is all I need. If you are happy, I am happy." He kisses me again and we continue our walk toward the vaporetti ticket office.

"If you are happy, I am happy." And if I am not happy? What then?

I push the worries from my mind and try to look forward to the future.

The Mother of Harlots

Chapter by TheWitchofStJohns

Chapter Summary

> So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.
>
> And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication:
>
> And upon her forehead was a name written:
> MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.
>
> - Revelations 17:3-5
>
> CW: Extremely dubious consent, very bad BDSM etiquette

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

THE GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA

MID AFTERNOON

AUGUSTUV-MAGNUS COQUILLE'S P.O.V.

I am sitting comfortably in a leather armchair in the outer office of the museum's director, Signora De Laurentis, waiting while she interviews Nimue for the position of curator. The interview is merely a formality, however; the job is theirs, thanks to my ministrations. I sincerely doubt that Signor Gandolfini will be returning any time soon to reclaim his job. Not in the condition I left him in, to be sure. I cannot help but smile at the memory.

Idly, my mind drifts back to the events of the day. Nimue was so ardent, so passionate, during our assignation in the banquet room of the Creme de Flouff. I honestly believe that they are warming up to me. This is quite fortunate, for I have absolutely no intention of letting them

go. Nimue is *mine* , completely and utterly. The thought fills me with a warm drowsiness, and I close my eyes as my mind wanders.

Abruptly, I recall that on our way out the door this morning, Mr. Rasiu-Velecchio had handed me the morning post. Eager to be on our way, I had tucked the few envelopes into my inside jacket pocket, determined to go over them if I had a spare moment. Well, no time like the present, I think, and I remove them from my pocket and begin to peruse the envelopes.

Bills, bank statements, advertising; nothing too pressing or interesting. At the bottom of the stack, however, is a letter, postmarked from Reykjavik, Iceland. From the return address I can see it is from my niece Sophia Pasternak, the daughter of my cousin Gregor Drukov. I have not seen or spoken to either of them in several years. A strange feeling of foreboding rises within me as I tear open the letter and begin to read.

Dear Uncle Augustuv,

I am afraid I have terrible news. My father has been missing for several days, and he was not answering his phone. My husband and I went to his home; nothing looked too out of place, but his phone was on his desk and there were several drops of dried blood on the floor. We went to the police immediately, and they began their investigation of his disappearance.

The police found my father's body this morning, buried in a shallow grave near the river. It was obvious that he had been murdered. There was a deep wound in his chest, and most of his blood had drained out. They will be performing an autopsy later today, and the investigation of his murder will be ongoing of course.

Please forgive me for informing you of this horrible tragedy in a letter. I would have phoned you, but I know I would have broken down and not been able to speak. We are all too shocked and devastated to be coherent right now. His funeral will be held this coming Sunday. We would love to see you and your wife, if you are able to come. If not, we understand completely.

If there is anything at all that you might be able to do to help the police find and punish whoever did this, we would be eternally grateful. Please keep my father in your prayers. Pray that his spirit finds peace.

Love always,

Sophia and family

I slowly lower the letter and stare blankly at nothing for a few moments. Dear Gregor, my favorite cousin. How many happy hours we spent playing and exploring together as children. *How did this happen? Who could have done this to him?* I finally notice that I am shaking and my breathing has become erratic. I am angry - *beyond* angry. And I must take that anger out on someone…

Shoving the envelopes back into my pocket, I leap from the chair and stride toward the director's inner office. I begin pounding on the door, startling the secretary who attempts to stop me. I push her away gruffly and continue to hammer away at the door.

"NIMUE! NIMUE, WE MUST LEAVE IMMEDIATELY!"

Signora De Laurentis throws open the door, shocked and affronted, Nimue standing behind her. "Signore Coquille! I must insist -"

"I am very sorry, Signora, but Nimue and I must leave at once. We will call you tomorrow to finalize things." I grab Nimue's hand and pull them after me as I turn to leave. "My apologies again, Signora, but this cannot be helped."

Nimue throws a helpless glance back at Signora De Laurentis as I virtually drag them out of the office, down the steps and into the street. All I can think about is getting home and taking my anger out on the only person who will receive it.

HANNIBAL/NIMUE'S P.O.V.

I have never seen my husband so furious. And he will not tell me why, no matter how much I beg him to tell me. As soon as we walk through the door of our home, he seizes my wrist and pulls me up the stairs to our bedchamber, slamming and locking the door behind him. He turns and stares at me, panting with the exertion.

"Darling, what has happened? Please, *tell me!*" I plead. He begins tearing off his jacket, his tie, his shirt.

"My cousin Gregor. In Iceland. He is dead. Murdered. ***Murdered!*** " he shouts, throwing his discarded clothing on the floor.

"Oh my God, Augustuv. I am so sorry, my dear," I murmur, approaching him and reaching out in an attempt to comfort him. He shoves me away violently, still breathing hard.

“You’re sorry. You’re *sorry* . Oh, that’s wonderful. ***I DON’T NEED YOUR PITY!*** ” he practically screams. He storms off to the bathroom, where I hear something clattering in the sink. Dear God, I think I know what’s coming next.

“Augustuv, darling, please! I only want to comfort you,” I say, my hands reaching out to him in supplication. He emerges from the bathroom, syringe in hand.

“*Oh, you’re going to comfort me, all right* ,” he growls, a positively feral look darkening his features. “*But not in the way I’m sure you were planning to.*” Before I can react, he grabs my arm and plunges the needle home. I grimace in fear and pain.

“Don’t worry, my sweet Nimue. This won’t knock you out completely. Just make you a little drowsy and a little more… *pliable* ,” he croons with a sickeningly sweet smile. I sigh in defeat and collapse into his waiting arms as the drug takes effect.

I am barely conscious of being stripped, laid out on the bed and manhandled. In a lucid moment I realize I am completely nude, kneeling on the bed with my arms behind me, a “doggy style” spreader bar locked onto my wrists and ankles. My entrance is coated with fisting cream, and my husband is currently working a very large dildo into it. He hums with satisfaction as I groan and sigh.

“Yes, my darling, do you like that? I knew you would,” he exclaims, almost hysterical delight in his voice. “What’s that? Faster, you say? Your wish is my command!” He begins pumping the dildo into me, faster and faster. The thing is just too huge, and I cry out in pain.

“Augustuv! Please, stop! It’s too much. Too much. I want *you* inside me, darling. Just you.” My speech is slurred from the drug. He appears to take pity on me and slowly slides the dildo out of my body, a shuddering sigh escaping my lips.

“There we go, sweetheart. I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he croons. “So you want *me* in there, not some lump of silicone, eh?” He strokes my back and buttocks tenderly.

“Yes, please,” I murmur. My arms and legs are extremely uncomfortable, but the muscle relaxants in the drug make it slightly more bearable. I barely register the sound of a jar lid being unscrewed.

“Then I am happy to oblige you, my sweet,” he says happily. I feel his hand at my entrance, covered with the fisting cream. One finger… two fingers… three fingers… four fingers, in quick succession. Then the thumb is added, and his entire fist is in my rectum.

This is something we have never done before. I am amazed that I am taking it so easily; the benzocaine in the cream, in addition to the muscle relaxants, are certainly helping. He slides his fist slowly back and forth, his other hand on my lower back, whispering words of

encouragement and admiration. It actually feels quite good; I find myself loving the stretch and the feeling of fullness. Until…

After a slide back he suddenly *slams* his fist forward, knocking the breath from my lungs. Another slide back… another *slam* . He gradually speeds up until he is essentially using my insides as a punching bag. "How do you like this, my darling?" he practically squeals with glee.

I don't.

I am wide awake now, the effects of the drug burned away. Something has shifted inside me. I feel that darker persona rising up within my body. The one that enjoys the pleasure of pain. But this pain is not pleasurable. *At all*. It has not been consented to. I am being assaulted. This dark sexual being knows the difference. I snarl as flames of anger and rebellion flare up and shoot through my body and psyche.

"ENOUGH!!!"

With a roar I propel myself forward. My husband's fist and forearm shoot out of my body, and he stumbles back in surprise. I land on my back. My own consciousness barely present, a superhuman strength inside me strains mightily against the restraints around my wrists and ankles. They are locked, and made of metal… but within seconds they ***snap*** as if they were flimsy plywood. I fling them aside, then leap off the bed, grab Augustuv and slam him onto the mattress on his back. His eyes are filled with amazement and terror as I kneel above him and wrap my hands around his throat.

Nimue, sweet, darling Nimue, is gone, at least for the moment.

***Carmina** has taken her place.*

" *Do. Not. EVER. Do anything like that to me again.* ***EVER!!*** " I snarl, breathing hard, my hands tightening, his eyes widening.

"There is pleasure. There is pain. There is pleasure mixed with pain. And then there is - ***ASSAULT!!*** *"*

His face is turning red and he is gagging and gasping. I come to my senses and release him, still keeping him pinned to the mattress. His hands fly to his throat as he continues to gasp, staring at me as if I have lost my mind. Perhaps I have.

"What you were doing to me was *not pleasurable!* It was an *assault!* I realize you are angered over the death of your cousin, but you have *no right* to take that anger out on me! No more drugging me - do you understand?" He nods, still staring at me in fear.

"Do you remember our wedding night? *You raped me!* I was weak, and afraid for Abigail, so I did nothing. I am *not* that person anymore! You *will* have my consent *at all times* during sex, is that clear? If I am drugged, I cannot consent! And this has nothing to do with our - our '*contract*,'" I spit out in disgust. "Abigail's safety is a completely separate issue. *I* have the

final say on this subject, not you! This is about *my* safety! And yours - because if you do *anything* like that to me ever again, so help me God:

I will kill you. Without hesitation. Do you understand?"

He swallows nervously, then carefully composes his face into a mask of calm. "Yes, my darling Nimue," he replies evenly. "I understand."

"Good," I mutter, climbing off of him and walking heavily to the bathroom. "Now please leave me, I wish to be alone for the rest of the day. Please call me when dinner is served." Without another glance in his direction, I close the door and lean against it, willing my breath and heart rate to return to normal.

After a moment I hear the door to the bedchamber open and close. I sigh with relief and turn on the shower, stepping into it and letting the hot water wash over me. *I must get clean.* I soap myself up thoroughly and rinse off slowly. My rectum aches, but fortunately a self-exam reveals no blood. I will see a doctor if the pain is not gone in a day or two. I stand there a few minutes more, feeling the terror of the last several hours swirling down the drain with the soap.

I am still breathless from Carmina's appearance. What power she has! She revels in the darker aspects of sexuality, but she also knows their limits. I close my eyes and smile as the water runs down my face, basking in her presence.

She is my fierce companion. She will protect me.

LATER THAT EVENING

After a fine dinner, during which my husband barely says three words to me and studiously avoids my eyes, we retire to the smoking room. We sink down into the blood-red leather armchairs on either side of the fireplace, each with a snifter of brandy and a thin black clove cigarette (I don't usually smoke, but I do find these delightful).

After several minutes of quiet relaxation, Augustuv clears his throat and raises his tentative gaze to me. "My dear, I apologize most profusely for my actions earlier. I... was not in my right mind. But you are absolutely correct. I have no right to make you the brunt of my anger, nor do I have the right to... to take you without your consent. I am afraid I still retain remnants of that old and certainly outdated attitude - 'my wife is my possession and I may do what I please with her, whenever I please.'" He manages to look rather sheepish, which I find amusing and more than a bit adorable.

"I accept your apology, Augustuv," I reply with a gracious nod, after releasing a cloud of clove-scented smoke into the air. "I do hope I live long enough to see that attitude dead and buried. Consent is vitally important to a healthy sexual relationship. And that goes both ways, you know. I do not have that right, either. Consent must be mutual - and enthusiastically given," I add with a flirtatious little smile.

My husband returns my smile, relaxed and relieved. "Well, in that case, darling Nimue - will you allow me to make it up to you?" he says almost wistfully.

"What did you have in mind, dearest?" I reply, smiling and looking up at him through my mascaraed lashes, ever the coquette.

He rises from his chair, placing the brandy and cigarette on the side table, and walks to me, holding his hands out. I take them and rise from my own chair as we gaze into one another's eyes.

"I grant you permission to do anything you like with me, anything at all, for the rest of the evening," he says in a voice I can only describe as reverent. "I am your plaything, your slave, my sweet Nimue. Use me as you will. I give you my enthusiastic consent," he adds with a wicked smile.

Well! This is certainly not what I was expecting. Augustuv-Magnus Coquille, vulnerable and submissive? I admit I am intrigued. Well, why not? Let's see what happens...

A half hour later we are naked, stretched out on our right sides on the blood-red leather chaise lounge against the wall, across from the fireplace. The lights are dim and the fire crackles softly. I am behind my husband, holding on to his left leg, bent at the knee, gently thrusting into him. I kiss and nibble on his neck and ear as he sighs and moans, leaning back into me.

This is... nice. This is *very* nice. I have never seen him so relaxed and pliant during sex before. He rarely allows me to top, which is another remarkable thing. Have we reached a turning point in our relationship? Or will he revert back to his old ways without a second thought? I try not to dwell on it as I reach down to grasp his erection, timing my strokes with my thrusts, which are becoming more urgent. Our breathing becomes heavier and I bite down gently on his shoulder.

"Ohhhh Nimue.... darling, you are incredible...." he groans, fucking into my fist as I fuck into his body, almost in unison.

"Augustuv," I growl into his ear. *"Cum for me, my dearest. Cum for me..."*

We cry out as we both cum, as close to simultaneously as we ever have. His hot seed spills over my fist as my own gushes into his trembling body.

We both soon drift off to sleep where we lie, sated, warm and happy.

Am I actually happy? I can't tell anymore, and I am weary of making the effort.

I must accept the fact that I will probably never see Anthony and Will again.

I must live my life as though I am happy.

Perhaps it will come true.

The Snare of the Fowler

Chapter by TheWitchofStJohns

Chapter Summary

> He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
> I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.
> Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence.
> He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.
> Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.
>
> - Psalm 91:1-5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LOCATION - STAVANGER, NORWAY

THE *CASSIOPEIA*

EARLY EVENING

SVETLANA'S P.O.V.

I watch quietly as *Big Brother* takes several puffs from his asthma inhaler, then places it back in his suit jacket pocket. Duncan Vizla - his new bodyguard - sits on the sill of the large window overlooking the Stavanger harbour, blowing white wreathes of smoke from his cigarette out into the crisp night air.

"It's time to go, Svetlana. Are you ready?" *Big Brother* asks. I nod as I smooth down my elegant silver dress and fetch my evening bag. He smiles and makes his way outside. Duncan jumps down from the sill and appears to be about to say something to him, only to shut his mouth again, deciding now is not the best time.

I can see a multitude of stars above, shining like a path in the night sky, as I head down the yacht's ramp and onto the dock. The water gleams like liquid silver in the setting sun over the

horizon, spreading a path from the *Cassiopeia* to points unknown. *Big Brother* holds out his hand to me as Duncan opens the door of the Land Rover, grinding the butt of his cigarette into the asphalt.

Big Brother helps me inside. He gives me a soft smile and squeezes my hand, reassuring me that all will be well. He closes the door and Duncan approaches him. He reaches his hand up, but quickly lowers it when *Big Brother* gives him a stern look. Their conversation is muffled by the glass of the door window.

"Don't. Just... don't. You're my bodyguard, Duncan. What happened between us was... a one-off thing. It will never happen again."

I watch Duncan grab hold of *Big Brother's* arms. *"Jean-Luc... why? Don't you understand? Why have you frozen your heart this way?"* He pulls him close and says something else I don't hear. I look away, pretending that I can't see what is happening as I await my driver.

Suddenly *Big Brother* slaps Duncan hard across the face and I turn my head toward them, eyes wide. Some of Duncan's gray-black fringe falls in front of his remaining eye; he wears a black eye patch over the place where his left eye used to be. His hands slip down and hang at his sides, and his head hangs down as well. He looks the picture of dejection. *Big Brother* glares at him, then strides over to his own Land Rover with a gruff "Let's go." My driver starts the engine and heads out as I turn for a final glance at Duncan, who trudges slowly over to the other car, where *Big Brother* is waiting impatiently. Soon both Land Rovers are on the road, and we leave the ***Cassiopeia*** behind us.

LOCATION - THE KOMODO DRAGON CASINO

NIGHT TIME

SVETLANA'S P.O.V.

The casino is busy tonight, the air filled with the chatter of patrons milling about sipping champagne and the clatter of the white balls spinning around at the roulette tables. *Big Brother* sits down at one of the poker tables and begins a hand of baccarat, quickly drawing other players into the game. Seeing he is all right, I wander over to the bar. An interesting looking person wearing a black and gold kimono dress embroidered with a Chinese dragon is sitting on one of the bar stools.

I discreetly flick my gaze over them as the bartender brings them their drink. This person is extremely lovely, but I'm honestly not sure if they are a man or a woman. I can tell they are observing me from the corner of their eye, so I try not to make my curiosity too obvious. They take a few sips from their drink, and I decide to go check out the roulette tables. I have

only taken a few steps away when I hear a tinkling smash. I turn quickly to see the kimono-clad beauty has dropped the glass and is swaying woozily on the bar stool. I am startled when *Big Brother* rushes past me, having jumped over the poker table, and catches them in his arms as they fall. I can barely hear their weak voice:

"*....Help.....Hannibal.....Coquille.....The* ***Sadeh.....****across....from your.....yacht....."*

Their eyes close and they go limp in his arms. He picks them up and hurriedly carries them bridal style out the door as I follow close behind. I almost trip and fall as one of the heels on the ridiculous high heels I'm wearing snaps like a toothpick. I take the shoes off and start running in my bare feet to catch up with them.

"Svetlana! Get in the car please," *Big Brother* calls. I head down the boat ramp, imagining the picture I must make in my shiny silver dress, bare feet and a broken pair of heels in my hand. I get into the passenger seat and pull on the seat belt as he comes around to the passenger side.

"Wait here and keep an eye on them. I'll be back in a minute," he says, then hurries back into the casino. I turn and look at the strange person in the black and gold kimono dress, propped up weakly in the back seat. Their eyes are still closed, but they begin to moan softly. Worried, I undo the seat belt and clamber into the back. I place the back of my hand against their sweaty forehead; they are burning with fever. I put my arm around their shoulders and let them lean against me as I wipe their brow with a moist towelette from my bag. They finally drift off to sleep, and I remain there with them until I too fall asleep, my head resting atop theirs. This certainly has been a most unusual evening.

JEAN-LUC LE CHIFFRE'S P.O.V.

The casino is closed; all the patrons and gamblers have gone home. On my orders, the casino's two large, burly "enforcers" - Brutus and Maxcis - slam the bartender down onto a poker table, chips scattering in all directions. To my disgust, I have discovered that the entire time he has been working at the Komodo Dragon, he has been drugging certain patron's drinks with Rohypnol to get them pliant and submissive. He would then take them to his apartment to sell for drugs and money. His victims have been trafficked to illegal brothels the world over.

Duncan is standing against a nearby wall, watching me with trepidation. He knows what I am about to do, and he does not like it. I roll up my sleeves and approach the pathetic man sprawled out on the table. I grab hold of the back of his head by his slimy hair and slam it down hard. He emits a pained, muffled grunt as I haul his head back up. I remove a switchblade from my pocket and flick it open, pressing it against the hollow of his throat.

"You thought you could get away with what you did, didn't you... Jerry? Truth be told, you didn't," I hiss at him. He turns his face and spits at me hard, wrenching himself free. He makes a run for it, pursued by Brutus and Maxcis, but Duncan gets to him first.

He lands a solid punch in Jerry's stomach. Jerry lets out a choked gasp, hunched over Duncan's arm as white froth dribbles out of his mouth. Duncan pulls his fist back, and Jerry falls to the floor in a crumpled heap. Duncan wastes no time grabbing him by the hair and dragging him towards me, Jerry making futile attempts to thrash out of his grip.

l find myself breathless at the sight of Duncan in action like this, swift and brutal but never losing his cool. I grip the switchblade firmly, step forward and place the blade against the bartender's throat. I can feel Duncan's gaze on me as I slice hard, severing the main artery and watching as blood spurts into the air.

I snap my fingers and point to the door, indicating to Brutus and Maxcis to head back to the cars. They silently nod and depart, leaving me alone with Duncan. He lets go of Jerry's body, and it falls to the floor with a thud. He steps over it and approaches me as I step backward, his intense gaze never leaving mine. I feel my hips hit the edge of a poker table, and Duncan seizes me, lifting me up onto it as he smashes his lips into mine.

I moan shakily, trying in vain to get away. It is too much - unwelcome memories are beginning to free themselves from the oubliettes in my mind. And yet, I find myself kissing him back as I wrap one leg around his waist and press the other against the inside of his thigh.

He grinds against my groin and I wrench my lips free, tilting my head back and moaning wantonly as he begins attacking my neck with his lips - licking, biting and sucking my pale flesh. He brings up a hand to sift through my hair, then his free hand slips between our bodies. He cups my erection through my suit trousers, rubbing up and down gently but firmly. I start to feel lightheaded. My hips rock into his hand and I feel such heat within me, like wicked tongues of flame caressing me from the inside out. When he trails his lips down from my neck towards my groin, I manage to push him away, breathing laboriously now.

"Don't... *Mmfff!!*" I begin to say, but my words are smothered once again by his glorious mouth, his beard and mustache thrillingly rough against my skin. He unbuckles my belt, unbuttons my trousers, and slowly pulls down the zipper. At last his large, calloused hand reaches into the confines of my trousers. I pull my lips away from his and look down. I want to see what that hand is doing to me...

He begins to stroke the outline of my cock in my boxers, thumbing the tip which has already begun to form beads of pre-cum that are soaking through the fabric. I spread my legs wider apart and rock my hips once more into his hand, gripping the edges of the poker table for support. Duncan rumbles with a sound that resembles a rough purr as he watches and listens to every move and sound I make - the way I gasp, pant and moan, closing my eyes when the ferocity of his gaze becomes too much, lifting one hand and grasping the back of his neck.

I feel myself losing all the semblance of control I possess. At last my body tenses strongly, thighs clenching around his waist and hips, my body shaking. A breathless cry escapes my lips as the orgasm rips its way through me. Cum spills into my boxers. My knuckles have turned white from my death-like grip on the table's edge.

Duncan, breathing as hard as I am, pulls me into a gentle kiss, soaking up all my moans and holding me close as the aftershocks roll through me. When our breathing has returned more

or less to normal, I lean back and we stare at each other. I simply cannot fathom what I see in those dark, heavy-lidded eyes. I reach up and stroke his face, his beard bristling beneath my fingers. I continue to look into those eyes as I whisper:

"Duncan... Why do you make me feel this way?

Why do you make it feel like I'm losing control to you... and yet, feel so free because of you?"

LOCATION - REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

THE HOME OF ANTHONY, MARKUS AND LUCIUS

MIDNIGHT

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

I sleep, and I dream...

I find myself once again in the Greek amphitheater, covered thickly by swirling mists. I lie in the center, as if asleep. The robed figure appears once more from out of the mist and approaches me. I lazily open my eyes and gaze up at them. I still cannot see their face, but their presence is surprisingly calming and I feel no threat from them.

They kneel down beside me and reach out a hand to touch my forehead. The same soft voice as before whispers...

"Cerca trova, my Orpheus. Firenze. Cerca trova. Firenze..."

I awake with a start and sit up in my bed.

Cerca trova... Firenze...

Seek and ye shall find... Florence...

That's it! I must go to Florence - *return* there, perhaps - and seek the answers I need about my past. I leap out of bed, pad down the hall and knock on the boys' bedroom door. Eventually hearing half-asleep mumbles of protest inside, I open the door to find four pair of sleepy eyes blearily gazing at me.

"My apologies, boys... but how does a trip to Italy sound?"

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

OFFICE OF DETECTIVE RINALDO PAZZI, POLIZIA DI FIRENZE

THE NEXT DAY, LATE MORNING

DETECTIVE PAZZI'S P.O.V.

Agent Jack Crawford from the F.B.I. has returned to Florence at my request. I thought that he and his forensic team would appreciate the chance to examine the bodies of Kronos Dimmond and Matthew Brown, still at the morgue in Thassos. Crawford had gotten a look at the body we discovered months ago that had been buried in Anthony Dimmond's grave, but unfortunately his own forensics had not gotten the chance to examine it. We had identified the body as that of Giuseppe De Luca, an itinerant dock worker whose general build was very similar to Anthony's. An autopsy and general forensics exam had determined a case of wrongful death.

"Wrongful death" was also the diagnosis after we discovered the body of Alberto Molinari in a park near the *Università degli Studi di Firenze* several weeks ago. Molinari was a well known thug-for-hire who had caused us considerable trouble over the years. He certainly will not be doing that ever again. His naked body was found tied to a tree, disemboweled and several vital organs removed. His tongue had been severed from his mouth, wrapped in several hundred-euro notes, and placed back into his mouth. His wallet lay on the ground before him, a handful of hundred-euro notes scattered all around. The message was obvious - someone had wasted their money. The whole scene was eerily reminiscent of the tableaux left behind by *Il Mostro* all those years ago. I could not help but feel that he had returned, especially after seeing seeing that photograph of Hannibal Lecter that Crawford had given me.

Crawford knows nothing of this, however. I am not about to tell him. Nor am I about to tell him that Mason Verger has contacted me in secret, offering me a staggeringly large sum to secure Will Graham and return him to Verger. He had been severely injured by Graham and is now blind in one eye. Whether he desires Graham's return in order to enact his revenge, or for some other reason, is not my concern. The only thing that concerns me is the money. It is therefore in my vested interest to find both Lecter and Graham before Crawford does.

I turn these things over in my mind as I sit at my desk, watching Crawford and his team pore over photographs of De Luca. Beverly Katz is bent over one photo with a magnifying glass, frowning in concentration. Brian Zeller is holding one photograph up to the light, looking

perplexed. And Jimmy Price (certainly a *finocchio*, this one) is switching back and forth between the autopsy report and a photograph, also looking perplexed.

"I still don't quite understand how your coroner determined that Dimmond's - I mean, De Luca's - face was mutilated by river rocks," says Ms. Katz. "The wounds are just too sharp and precise. Only a razor or a very sharp knife could have made these."

"Agreed," pipes up Mr. Price. "He wasn't in the water long enough for this type of damage to be inflicted merely by being *in* the water."

"Whoever killed him was making damn sure he wouldn't be able to be identified by his facial features alone," adds Mr. Zeller. "And the estimated date of death is two days *after* Dimmond fell from the cliff at the Courting Muse Hotel."

Crawford looks up at me sharply. "How did your people miss that, Detective?" he asks with a frown.

I lean back in my chair and sigh. "We are merely human, Agent Crawford. Humans make mistakes. We are overworked and underpaid. I have spoken to them about this sort of thing time and time again. All I can do is apologize and promise you that it will not happen again."

Crawford and his team glance at each other with skeptical looks and shakes of the head, then return to the photographs. I sigh again and glance at my watch, counting the minutes until their taxi arrives to take them to the airport for their flight to Thassos. Even though they are here at my invitation, I will be glad to be rid of these meddlesome Americans.

The cell phone on my desk buzzes. I see from the screen that it is Mason Verger calling. I quickly snatch up the phone and rise from my chair.

"If you will excuse me for a moment, I must take this call," I say, leaving the room and feeling Crawford's suspicious gaze follow me. I duck into a nearby empty office and close the door firmly.

"Yes, what is it?" I snap.

"Detective Pazzi," Verger drawls in that smarmy voice. *Dio mio*, this man is repulsive. Fortunately for me, however, his money is extremely attractive. "Just thought I'd check in and see how the hunt is going. It's been two weeks, after all, and I am *most anxious* to get my hands on Will Graham again."

"I am sure you are," I reply with a grimace. "We are doing everything we can to locate him. It might interest you to know that the F.B.I. are here looking for him as well." I can tell he is about to object, so I hastily add, "Rest assured that I am giving them minimal cooperation, and in fact they are leaving shortly for Greece to investigate a case that may be related to all this. I promise you that I *will* find Mr. Graham before they do."

"You'd better," Verger growls. "I'm paying you enough. Keep me in the loop, will you? I expect daily calls from you from now on. Even if there's no news. Call me to tell me there's no news. Got it?"

"I've got it, yes," I sigh. He disconnects, and I make my way back to my office. For the first time I find myself wondering if any amount of money is worth all this *cazzate*.

Before I reach my office, I see Crawford and his agents heading out. "Detective, our taxi is here," says Crawford, reaching out to shake my hand. "Thanks again for allowing us to invade your territory. We'll let you know what we find on Thassos."

"My pleasure, Agent Crawford," I reply, directing a nod and a weary smile at him and his colleagues. "Yes, please keep me apprised. *Buona fortuna a tutti voi."* I watch them head down the hall and wonder when this will all be over.

JACK CRAWFORD'S P.O.V.

As we troop down the hall, the others are chattering animatedly but I am barely listening. There is something about Pazzi that I just don't trust. He doesn't seem too concerned about his department's slipshod handling of this case, and that bothers me. And, his alarmed look when his phone rang, coupled with his hasty departure from the room, was definitely a red flag. It was obvious the caller wasn't his wife asking him to stop at the store on his way home. Something is definitely off here. I think he knows more than he's telling.

We walk through the doors and stand on the sidewalk for a moment, making sure we're all on the same page as far as what will be happening once we arrive on Thassos. The taxi is idling nearby, ready to go. My eyes wander a bit as I reach into my coat pocket to fetch some papers. My glance falls on a man walking between two tow-headed boys, holding their hands as the boys speak excitedly in a language I don't recognize. They are headed right towards us. I smile at the boys' antics and glance up at the man with them. That is when I freeze and nearly stop breathing.

It is Dimmond. Anthony Dimmond.

"DIMMOND!!" I shout.

He halts for just a moment, eyes wide with fear. Then he drops the boys' hands, turns and runs.

"Watch the boys! Stay with them!" I shout at my startled team, running after Dimmond as fast as my legs will carry me. I barely register the boys starting to cry and Beverly's voice trying to reassure them.

Dimmond swiftly zigzags through the pedestrians on the sidewalk. He is a damn fast runner, and it's all I can do to keep up with him. At one point I lose sight of him when a large gaggle of tourists blocks my view. By the time I see him again, he is rounding a corner. I eventually round the corner myself, and see a series of crumbling alleyways. He could have gone down any one of them.

I have to briefly stop to catch my breath. I'm not as young as I used to be, that's for damn sure. I make my way down each alleyway, checking for doors, stairs, hidden alcoves, anywhere he could have slipped into. Absolutely no sign of him. The man has disappeared. Finally I stop, breathing hard, looking around me in despair.

Goddammit. I almost had him.

Chapter End Notes

Finocchio - Derogatory slang for a male homosexual
Cazzate - Bullshit
Buona fortuna a tutti voi - Good luck to you all

My Lips Shall Greatly Rejoice

Chapter by UnknownMusing

Chapter Summary

> My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee; and my soul, which thou hast redeemed.
>
> - Psalm 71:23

LOCATION – FLORENCE, ITALY

THE COURTING MUSE HOTEL

EARLY MORNING

A gentle breeze blows through glass doors leading out to a rose and herb garden filled with sweet-smelling roses – many different variations - and herbs of jasmine, lavender, chive, coriander, thyme and others. A fine suit dress and a day dress lie haphazardly thrown on the floor. Glasses of wine only half-finished sit on a small coffee table next to a blue vase patterned with white snowbells and a hare nibbling on a dandelion.

On their knees in a queen-size bed, two women kiss gently, their lips moving against each other's – warm, moist lips tasting of the fine wine they have both drunk – as hands touch and caress, memorizing each part of their bodies. Margot pulls back, looking at Alana, whose pupils have expanded – she sees only love deep within those lovely eyes.

They kiss again, this time with growing passion, tongues entwining in harmony inside and out. Margot slides her hand down between their naked bodies, cupping the warm wetness of Alana's pulsating sex. She gently begins to rub her fingers against the folds that are like flower petals parting under her touch, until she manages to slip into their silken warmth as Alana emits a hitched, breathless gasp and cries out her name.

"Margot!!!"

They fall among silken sheets which rise around them, wafting upwards into the air – almost like sails in the wind – and fluttering back down, while breathless pants, gasps and moans come from them both.

Alana has never felt like this before. Never felt touch like this from the opposite sex. The last time she had been touched was when she had lain with Hannibal, who she had last seen in the

dining area of the hotel, in a persona she only had heard rumours about. And now Margot is rolling her onto her back, slipping her fingers softly in and out in such a delicious way. Alana can feel herself starting to rock her hips into the palm of the hand between her thighs.

"Alana, may I?" Margot asks her. Alana replies breathlessly, "*Yes."* She watches the other woman begin to kiss her way downwards – lips caressing her nipples until they become ruddy and peaked, biting softly at the perfectly formed teats – then further downwards, reaching the centre of her warm, moist core.

Margot's sleek head bends down, causing Alana to arch her back and give a soft, breathless cry as she feels a slick tongue start to lap softly at her aching, moist folds – delving between them, licking and sucking. She slips both her hands down to cradle the other woman's head, thighs quivering and breath coming in breathless moans.

"*Margot…Don't stop….Don't stop…..Oh, God!!!"*

Eyelids fluttering as she tries not to dwell on the memory of the night she and Hannibal had done this, soon followed by having sex with him. Not knowing at the time that it was just part of the game he was playing with Jack Crawford of the F.B.I.

But the memory comes, even as pleasure is given to her by Margot, dragging her down into the black insidious waters. Encompassing her as the Serpent of the Deep swims in the murky waters, watching her slowly descend down into the abyss.

Laughter, rich and husky, followed by a kiss on her shoulder as Alana feels Hannibal against her. He is helping her play the theremin.

"You're killing it. You're killing it."

Sitting there on the edge of his bed, a warm fire crackling in the hearth of the bedroom fireplace, bathing the Samurai armour in the hall with a faint glow. Hannibal brings his hand up to move her hand softly over the instrument.

It's when he does this that she notices a hint of nail polish on his nails, only to be distracted by a screeching noise coming from the electronic instrument before them.

"It sounds like a dying cat."

"Oh, Alana. Are you sure you haven't been drinking too much beer behind my back?"

"Hannibal!!" Alana admonishes gently, making him laugh again. He picks up his half-finished glass of wine. As he turns to take a sip, she notices another sight that makes her frown slightly – his ears are pierced, and there is a hint of glossy lipstick on his lips.

Quickly she goes back to trying to tame the theremin in some way. To her surprise and delight, she begins to play a hauntingly beautiful tune. She hears Hannibal give a soft hitched gasp, at the same time a tinkling smash echos throughout the bedroom.

Looking down, she sees the wine glass he had been holding is now on the floor in shards, wine spreading across the carpet as he slips away into the bathroom.

Was it the tune that made him drop it?

Concerned for him, she pushes the instrument out of the way and gets up. Hannibal is coming back into the room with a small damp towel. Kneeling, he begins to collect the shards of glass before sponging out the wine before it permanently stains his beautiful bedroom carpet.

"Hannibal, is something wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong, dear Alana," Hannibal replies, getting up and walking over to the wash-basket near the bathroom door. He drops the towel into it and comes back over to her.

They both fall gently on top of the soft satin sheets of his bed. Hannibal kisses her languidly and attentively – her lips, neck and breasts, where he caresses her nipples with soft kitten licks, swirling his tongue around until the fine teats become ripe and peaked under his ministrations. He then travels further downwards, and she looks down to watch what he is doing.

Maroon eyes stare deeply into hers, and for a moment Alana feels like he could see deep into her soul – revealing things she didn't want to remember or experience ever again – until his sleek head bends down between her thighs.

Her back arches slightly off the bed while he intimately tastes her, and yet when she looks down again… the memory is blurring into what is happening to her now and what happened with Hannibal.

One moment she is gazing at Hannibal's head, the next moment it is Margot's sleek dark head. Alana squeezes her eyes shut for a moment, willing the apparition away. But when she opens them again, the other woman's face has conjoined with Hannibal's. They are one being now.

They both speak. Alana, feeling a scream building in her throat, lets it out.

Howl For Her

Chapter by UnknownMusing

Chapter Summary

> Babylon is suddenly fallen and destroyed: howl for her; take balm for her pain, if so be she may be healed.
> - Jeremiah 51:8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

COQUILLE'S RESIDENCE OVERLOOKING THE CITY

EARLY MORNING

AUGUSTUV-MAGNUS COQUILLE'S P.O.V.

Something wakes me, my eyes fluttering open as I rise slightly. I feel the warm, soft duvet cover over the both of us has slipped downwards slightly. At some point during the night I had turned in my sleep to face my...*wife.*

Nimue looks so peaceful and calm, as if nothing can disturb them as they sleep. Their hands are resting on the chaise lounge pillows before them. Memories of all that had occurred last night come flooding back to me.

"Augustuv,"

A growl in my ear.

"Cum for me, my dearest. Cum for me..."

How we both cried out, my back arching against them, trembling heavily through the throes of the intense orgasm which had ripped its way through me. Then, sated, feeling strangely warm and happy, I allowed sleep to overcome me.

I had lost control of my power over Nimue, allowing them to have their way with me, and yet, right now my body aches pleasantly and the memories are sweet. I roll over to lie on my

back and bring my hands up to comb through my slightly damp hair, sighing softly as I remember that tomorrow - no - is it morning now? Today! - is our first wedding anniversary.

The day my father was murdered. The day I married Nimue and...afterwards, yes, I admit, hurt them because of my anger and possessiveness....but..... *they were mine and only mine....No one else's.....* Lowering my hands, I feel my neck with one hand as I also vaguely remember Nimue doing something strange at some point. My hand goes lower and comes to rest on my shoulder.

I would have gone further in my investigation if hadn't been for Nimue stopping my hand. Their shadow covers me as I look up into those maroon eyes - seeing myself reflected in them. They bend their head down, and I turn my face away, trying to calm my heart which is starting to pound against my rib cage.

"I'll make breakfast, shall I? It seems....our cook did a runner last night after dinner without any explanation, Augustuv," Nimue says casually. I whirl my head around to look at them. I swiftly sit up and grab hold of their arms in a tight grip.

"Do you have *any* semblance of control?! Goddammit.....If you murdered....You...." I snarl, finding myself slapping Nimue hard across the face, making their fringe fall in front of their eyes. They turn their face to gaze calmly at me, as if they had not been affected at all by it. Blood begins to trickle down the side of their lip, dripping onto the blood-red leather of the chaise lounge. Chest heaving in anger, I grab their throat with both hands as I loom over them and pin them harshly down.

Nimue simply continues to look up at me, even with my hands around their pale throat. Staring deeply into my eyes and smirking at me with cherry red lips as another face appears over theirs, the face of someone from my past - someone I had once married and destroyed.

"Is this what you want, Augustuv? Me, submissive, pliant, and allowing you to do whatever you wish with me? Whatever happened to what I said to you last night - '*I do hope I live long enough to see that attitude dead and buried. Consent is vitally important to a healthy sexual relationship. And that goes both ways, you know. I do not have that right, either. Consent must be mutual - and enthusiastically given.'* And you replying, '*I grant you permission to do anything you like with me, anything at all, for the rest of the evening. I am your plaything, your slave, my sweet Nimue. Use me as you will. I give you my* ***enthusiastic consent.'*** " The memory makes me shudder heavily above them. Letting go of their throat, I start to whimper as tears blind my vision. I feel I must be going mad as I shout:

"I.....WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ME!!? WHAT....IS....THIS GAME OF YOURS YOU'RE PLAYING WITH ME?!!!"

"No game, my dearest. Don't you understand...you said you love me, remember? Well....this is me saying.....***I love you."***

I almost forget how to breathe.

Hearing Nimue confess they love me makes me wish it were true in some way. In all my life I have never experienced love.

Is this what love feels like - painful to feel, yet beautiful to have?

Is that what Nimue's love for me is?

Nimue gets to their knees, pulling me up as well onto mine, and gently wipes away the tears forming in my eyes with their thumbs. Cupping my cheeks, they lean forward and kiss me tentatively on the lips, testing my reaction. Sliding my eyes closed as I am embraced in what could be considered a version of ***The Kiss*** by Klimt, we slowly begin to kiss in the streaming sunlight filtering through the gaps in the curtains.

"*Nimue, Nimue.....Nimue..."*

I find myself whispering, repeating their name again and again between kisses, feeling their hand sift through my hair and the other holding me close to them.

*Is this **love** between us?*

Maybe it is.

***Love** ...so deep it blooms like a midnight flower opening its petals to the moths of the night.*
***Nimue** - my darling sweet wife; and **Carmina** - a personality I've yet to tame.*

*But for now....I can bask in Nimue's **love** for me and feel at peace for once in my life.*

Peace with the person I love dearly.

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

THE GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA

MID-MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Signora De Laurentis, I apologise for my husband's behaviour yesterday. I'm afraid.... something came to light and he was most upset by it."

"That is all right, Signora Coquille. Perfectly understandable. Things like family matters I say always come first before anything else."

"Yes. Quite."

The museum director thankfully doesn't comment on that. I am sitting once more in her office, wearing a simple dress of crème white and orange, with my husband's choker around my neck to cover the bruises left from his near-stranglehold on my throat. Signora De Laurentis places a hand over mine, and I raise my eyes to her. She is looking at me with a touch of concern on her face. She rises from her chair, taking it with her as she comes around the desk and places the chair in front of me.

"Signora Coquille, there are some questions I would like to ask you," she says, sitting down and taking both my hands in hers. She takes a deep breath, then asks, "Is your husband abusing you, Signora Coquille? Is he harming in you in any way? Why do you not report him to the Venetian police? I've seen the bruises he has left on your neck."

I stiffen at this, sitting up and slipping my hands from her grip. I rise from my chair, trembling and attempting to catch my breath. The museum director is gazing at me sympathetically, and I want to tell her everything. Instead I turn and half-stumble out of her office. Augustuv is waiting for me in the outer office, reading a book. At my appearance his head snaps up and his eyes widen in concern. He quickly inserts a bookmark into the book and closes it.

"Could we leave? I…. feel like I need some fresh air," I tell him. He gets up and takes hold of me, murmuring and nodding in reply.

We walk slowly through the city of Venice, Augustuv-Magnus' arm around my waist, keeping me close to him. We head down one of the side streets, under the shadowed alcoves away from the hustle and bustle of the main street, until the noise becomes muted – silent. He turns me softly to face him, tilting my chin up so I consider his eyes.

His head bends down, lips covering mine as he pushes me gently back into an alcove. I find myself kissing him back with passion, my tongue begging permission to probe his mouth as he changes position each time to deepen the kiss. He lifts me up against the alcove wall as I wrap my thighs around his waist for support.

Our tongues entwine inside and outside our mouths as I feel his hand begin to slide up my dress, caressing my thigh on his right hip.

It would have gone further if hadn't been for a polite feminine cough interrupting us. Startled, we pull away from each other to see…a poorly disguised Freddie Lounds. My husband seems displeased at being denied the chance to savour me.

"May I ask why you are interrupting us, Miss Lounds?" he asks, lowering my legs from around his waist and leaving me to sort out my dress, smoothing out wrinkles and such like. I am wondering why she is here in Venice as well. Certainly not sight-seeing with that disguise on, a dowdy black dress and a black scarf covering her gaudy red curls, pulling a shopping trolley behind her. An obvious attempt to blend in with the little gray-haired *nonne* who roam the streets of every Italian city.

I see her face pale slightly under Augustuv's calm gaze; he now looks like he had been doing nothing to me at all. She manages to compose herself, clasping her little bag tightly. She had

done the same so long ago when she came to my office pretending to be a client, after surreptitiously recording a conversation between myself and Will. (*Will.....*)

"No doubt recording us. She has done it to me in the past, Augustuv," I say to him. He murmurs a small "*Hmmm"* at this information. He takes a step toward Freddie and snatches the bag from her so quickly he leaves her blinking at the empty space where it had been in her hands.

He opens it, looks within and pulls out a small, sleek silver recording device, plus a digital camera which he quickly slips into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He takes a step back when she tries to snatch back her recording device.

"Delete, Miss Lounds... or there will be ***serious consequences*** for your job. I do know your father, Ernest Lounds, and I doubt he will be happy to hear how his daughter is illegally recording things which are none of her business," Augustuv says, a hint of his inner Serpent revealing itself. With a trembling hand and a frown, she takes the device from him and deletes any record of whatever she had recorded of us both.

"My camera. I want it back," she pouts angrily, then turns to me. "Plus, Hannibal, that conservation I recorded was of you and Will talking about his empathy disorder." I bristle slightly at her rudeness against my darling Will. I call up my internal Rolodex of people who I have yet to get rid of, and place her name below another person – my husband – saving dear Bedelia for last.

"Why don't we discuss this matter somewhere else," I say, stepping close to Augustuv. He slips his hand around my waist to hold me close to him, seemingly intrigued with what I have to say.

"We would love to have you for dinner, my husband and I. Will you accept, Miss Lounds?" I purr.

"Oh…. umm…. of course. I would love to share dinner with you and chat about the photos on my camera, if you're wanting some to keep. Ummm… Excuse me, I really must get back to my hotel*."*

I nod in reply, watching her quickly leave and head back onto the main street, where I see her disappearing amongst the sheep. Augustuv turns to face me.

"Any more things you would like to surprise me with, Nimue my sweet? I assure you…Miss Lounds will not be staying after dinner for long."

"Augustuv, get rid her and you'll turn her into a martyr. Many people know her, including Jack Crawford."

"Well, it's a good thing he thinks my darling sweet wife is dead."

"You lied to him!!?"

"Of course. You are mine and only mine, do you understand?"

I turn my face one side, still conflicted because…yes…Augustuv is my husband and, after a fashion, I am his wife.

He confessed his love to me, and I played a dangerous game by telling him I love him as well, when he had his hands around my throat.

Abigail is safe because of the "***contract***" I have made with my husband, and yet, something is still eating away at her. Why won't she tell me what is is? Why?

He made….. *love*.... to me, and I to him.

"How long have you known?" I ask him, feeling him take hold of my arms as we stand in the shadowed alcove area.

"Known what?" he asks, as if he doesn't know. Perhaps he is playing a game with me to test my reactions, get me to bring out Carmina again to protect me.

"I…" I start, but close my mouth again. I keep my face turned away from him, allowing the sunlight filtering through the ocular stone circle above us to make the earring on my ear glint softly in the warm light.

I don't love you.

"Planning to run away again, Nimue?" he asks, jolting me out of my thoughts. I find myself answering in my mind.

Yes.

But all I can say is "No… I…just…" I yearn to be anywhere else but here in the grasp of this snake. I hear him say in a sneering tone, "Still love Anthony and Will. How very sweet of you. It's touching the way you still hold that *supposed love* for them."

"I…do…love them. Your love…is…" I begin to say, but the word "*poisonous*" will not come out. Suddenly I wrench free from him and start to run as fast as I can through the side streets and alleyways, hearing him shouting my name. Above us dark storm clouds have formed, and a deluge of rain begins to descend on the city of Venice.

"NIMUE!!!!!?"

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

SAN MICHELE CEMETERY ISLAND

FIVE DAYS LATER

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Rain water soaks my dress completely. My mascara is now nothing more than black trails running down my cheeks. My lipstick has become a garish, macabre Joker's grin. I stumble down the long hallway leading into the tall church, ornate stained glass windows bearing upon them figures of Death and Life. I welcome the warmness of it.

My breath is coming in laboured gasps and I'm weak with a fever raging its way through my body. I have spent the last five days in the rain, murdering any person I considered rude in the back alleyways of Venice, leaving behind the carnage and ruin of their bodies.

Walking up the aisle between the pews, I feel my strength finally fail me. I fall onto the steps leading up the dais to a statue of a woman with a solitary tear running down her cheek as she leans over the body of a youth - Romeo and Juliet carved into stone.

Lying on my side, I try in vain to stay awake. I must not linger here. I must leave. But I slump back down again when I try to get up. With a weak, anguished moan I sink into unconsciousness as blackness swoops in, covering me in its embrace.

LOCATION - COQUILLE'S VENETIAN RESIDENCE

LATE AFTERNOON

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"*NIMUE!!!?"*

"*Signore Coquille, please. Your wife is very ill with pneumonia. Please, just calm down and you may see her."*

"Will she be all right?"

"As long as you keep her warm, eating and drinking, then she will recover. She just has a very high fever now."

Dimly, I hear a shout – Augustuv, my husband. My eyes flutter weakly open, my vision blurry. I see him talking with a doctor in our bedchamber. I must be back at our Venetian

residence. Hearing his voice breaking with such raw unbridled emotion makes me understand the amount of pain I've caused him since I ran away from him the week before.

"*Augustuv…. Augustuv*?" I call out, my voice so weak and frail it makes my throat hurt, as if shards of glass have been shoved into it. I begin to cough heavily, a spasm of pain shooting through my chest. He rushes to my bedside.

He cradles me, turning me so I can violently heave into a wash basin placed on a chair near the bed. He strokes my cheek lightly with his knuckles when I pull back to look at him, after wiping my mouth with a clean cloth next to the basin.

"I'm…sorry…for running away. I wasn't thinking when I said those things. It was nerves because of our wedding anniversary which we've now missed that made me..." I begin to say, but he shushes me, placing a finger to my lips. He doesn't need to know. All that matters is that I'm here now with him.

The doctor has gone, no doubt convinced by Augustuv that he could care for his wife himself. He lays me back down among the soft pillows and rises from the bed as a maid, keeping her head down, takes the basin away. Another basin and a jug of cool water are set down in its place.

"Leave us," he says quietly to the maids, who give a small curtsy and silently leave the room. He picks up the jug, pouring some of the water into the clean basin. He places them back on the bedside table, then dunks a clean cloth into the water. He squeezes out the excess water and sets about tenderly dabbing my forehead, cheeks and neck, slowly cooling down the fever raging within me.

I stay still, tilting my head backwards when he indicates I should do so. When I feel more or less human again, I push his hand gently away. He places the cloth over the rim of the wash basin. He then goes around to his side of the bed, slips off his clothes off, pulls back the covers and climbs in next to me.

I roll to face him, snuggling close. He allows me to rest my head on his chest. I listen quietly to his steady heartbeat as he takes one of my hands to softly kiss my knuckles, including the one where his ring still rests. He pulls the covers more tightly around us, cocooning us in their warmth.

My eyelids droop as I hear him begin to quietly hum the nursery rhyme I used to sing to Mischa.

Mischa…sweet darling Mischa……I miss you.

I miss you, so dearly.

<u>LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY</u>

VENICE MARCO POLO AIRPORT

JEAN-LUC LE CHIFFRE'S P.O.V.

"Would all passengers please remember to collect their belongings at the Baggage Claim. We hope you had a nice flight and please enjoy your time in Venice."

I take several puffs from my asthma inhaler and take a deep breath in an attempt to calm myself. I slip it back into my suit pocket and take a sip from a Styrofoam cup of dreadful coffee. Nervously I stand up, smooth down my suit and intend to go see what is taking Will and Mischa so long in collecting the mongrel retriever. Duncan, who has been sitting next to me, abruptly grabs my wrist.

"*Duncan…. not here. Talk to me about it later when we get to…"* I begin to whisper, but the look on his face stops me cold. I want to say something else – anything else - to him. He stands and brings up his free hand, so large and warm, to cup my cheek lightly.

"*I would rather get it out now,"* he whispers back in reply. An airport security guard appears to be heading towards us, and he quickly lets go of my wrist and lowers his other hand from my cheek, his expression turning stone cold. He has slipped back into bodyguard mode.

"Signore Dvaras?" the guard asks. I nod in reply to the fake name (of sorts). "I'm afraid something has happened with your daughter and your - *other* companion." I bristle at the barely-concealed contempt in his voice. Speaking about Will in his *Pearl-Lace* persona in such a homophobic way is absolutely unacceptable. Duncan and I immediately follow him to where Mischa and Will are being held.

Mischa is glad to see me, getting out of her chair and rushing over to me as I embrace her. She is frightened and unhappy. I see Will is standing near the barred window looking out, his face turned away.

"Svetlana? Will? What is going on here?" I snap. There is a horrible tension in the air. Something is very, very wrong.

Will slowly turns from the window to face me. His face is bruised and battered, and he is holding a bloodied handkerchief to his lip, which has been split open. He has a black eye which is swollen shut. He nods toward the security guard but does not look at him. "Why don't you ask him?" he rasps, anger simmering in his hoarse voice.

I see red. I hand Mischa over to Duncan and march over to the bored-looking security guard, stopping when we are nose to nose, and fix him with a baleful glare. "You had better tell me

what has happened here or I will have your job and sue this airport into the *ground*," I growl furiously. The man sighs and hesitates, looking a little less bored.

*"**NOW!!**" I shout in his face.*

"Well, Signore," he begins a bit nervously, "first of all, it seems that your dog got into a fight with another dog belonging to a very famous actress, you see, and your daughter -"

"It was *her* dog who attacked Winston!" Mischa cries. Duncan is standing protectively at her side, his hands on her shoulders. His one-eyed gaze at the security guard is death incarnate. "Will and I tried to stop them, I tried to tell her that her dog is dangerous!" Mischa continues, on the verge of tears. "But she was very rude and - and full of herself, saying things like 'Don't you know who I am?' As if I cared! Her dog was hurting Winston! Will finally managed to separate them, Winston's okay, but I was *so mad*, and I - well, I told her exactly what I thought of her." I can't hold back a small, fond smile at this point.*That's my girl.*

"So she got all huffy and started making a scene and all the guards came rushing over and she blamed everything on me," she finishes in a rush, finally bursting into tears. She turns and buries her face in Duncan's chest. He holds her soothingly, murmuring words of comfort.

I turn back to the guard. "Obviously my daughter was not at fault here. If you are planning on charging her with anything, I *strongly* suggest you drop the matter immediately. Now," I point to Will without taking my eyes off the guard, who is beginning to look sheepish. "Explain to me why Mr. Graham looks like *this*."

"Signore, you - you must admit," the man stutters pathetically, "a man, dressed like that, looking the way he does, that long curly hair... well, some of the guards, they - well, surely you understand -"

"Spit it out, you pitiful excuse for a man! What? Happened?" I shout, at my wit's end and close to hysteria. I begin wheezing, and fumble in my jacket for my inhaler. As I take several puffs, Will steps forward. He begins speaking calmly and evenly, his voice still hoarse.

"A few of the guards obviously thought I was a woman, and therefore fair game. They started making lewd comments, asking me what street corner I worked on, if I've ever had a man with 'ten inches.'" He pauses and turns his head toward the guard. "I have, by the way," he drawls, the guard lowering his head to stare absently at the floor. Again I cannot hold back a smile.

"Anyway," Will continues, "at some point I decided I'd had enough, and I swung at one of them. I think I broke his nose," he adds, his voice lightening and a wry smile spreading across his battered features. "As you can well imagine, they didn't take too kindly to that, so two of them held my arms and the one I hit started punching me. Finally this one here," he waves a hand carelessly at the guard, "breaks it up and sends them away, and I got this nice handkerchief for my trouble. And that's about it, really."

I glance at Duncan with a nod in the guard's direction. He places Mischa in Will's care, then stalks over behind the guard and roughly pulls his arms behind him, locking him into a full

nelson. The guard stares at me, eyes wide in terror. I stand before him calmly, hands behind my back.

"You know, I've been thinking this over," I begin. "And I've made a decision. You're going to love this. I *will* have your job, and the job of every miserable guard who failed to protect my daughter and assaulted Mr. Graham, and I *will* sue this airport into the ground. What do you think of that, my friend? Hmm?" I cock my head and gaze at him impassively as he sputters and fumes.

I've had enough of this. I nod again to Duncan and he releases the guard, who staggers away wincing in pain. "Svetlana? Please collect Winston, my dear, and let's get out of this disgusting hell hole."

Duncan collects our bags as Mischa disappears down a hall, returning shortly with Winston on a leash, seemingly none the worse for wear. As we head out the door, I glance back at the guard, who is flexing his arms and shoulders and twisting his neck around, still grimacing. Frankly, he looks ridiculous.

"You'll be hearing from my lawyers in the morning. Buona giornata, signore."

Chapter End Notes

Nonne - Grandmothers
Buona giornata, signore - Have a nice day, sir

Your Joy No Man Taketh From You

Chapter by UnknownMusing

Chapter Summary

> And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.
>
> - John 16:22

Author's Note – How Le Chiffre got his scar in italics

LOCATION – VENICE, ITALY

LE CHIFFRE'S RESIDENCE

MID MORNING

JEAN-LUC LE CHIFFRE'S P.O.V.

Still feeling jet-lagged from the flight, I allow the maids to take our bags off my hands. I head upstairs and see Mischa starting to show Will around the house. Winston – his dog – seems wary of my Persian cat and two Egyptian cats – Shmet, Cleo and Persephone – who are watching with all their feline curiosity. I hear a clattering noise coming from above, followed by the appearance of the three rambunctious kittens of the older cats - Julius, Cassia and Ruffnuts – chasing a ball of knitting wool.

It bounces to land at my feet. The kittens notice me and begin to purr and rub themselves against my legs. I sigh softly, knowing I'm going to have to fetch the roller and clean cat hair from my trousers again. I kneel to stroke them, feeling Ruffnuts nudge his head into my hand when I scratch his patchwork ear.

"You wee devils. Have you been in Mischa's knitting basket again?" I joke, picking up the ball of wool and chucking it at Duncan up on the landing. He catches it single-handedly with a wry grin. I am continuing up the stairs when I feel something soft hit the back of my head. I

stop and turn slightly on the landing where the stairs split into three curved stairways, one of which leads up to the attic, where I sometimes would go to relax and paint just anything that came to mind.

Shifting my gaze between Duncan, Mischa and Will, I see they are doing a version of *Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil and See no Evil* in an amusing pantomime. I find myself shaking my head with a smile. I head upstairs to the bedchamber, hearing their warm laughter fill this place that was once filled with another kind of laughter – the mad kind, when I had tried in vain to understand my husband, feeling like Lady Macbeth.

Now Augustuv-Magnus – my ex-husband – has my brother Hannibal in his clutches. I knew from the painful experience of being married to that vile snake of a man that it was not easy to escape him. I thought I loved him and him me, only to realize it had all been a lie that came shattering down like a thousand mirrors being broken apart.

The night I left he rushed at me, trying to make me stay, holding my arms tightly and begging me not to leave him.

"Jean-Luc!!!? Don't do this!!!"

I look at Augustuv – my husband – feeling him tighten his hands around my arms and trembling heavily. I bring my hand up to take off the ring on my finger as he shakes his head at me.

*"This isn't…**…love** between us, Augustuv. It's……**poison.** Can't you see you can't control me this way?"*

He lets go of my hands, and I walk over to the bed – the bed we shared ever since we had married. I slip off his ring – two snakes entwined biting each other's tails around an ornate opal – and begin to turn, when suddenly he slams me down on the bed.

He seizes me around the throat, and I grab his hands by his wrists in an attempt to wrench them off. He kneels over me to gain more control, tightening his grip on my throat and forcing my head to tilt backward. I start to gasp and wheeze laboriously, my vision dimming in and out of focus. I let go of his wrists and reach weakly for the switchblade hidden under the pillow.

I manage to grasp it, slashing instinctively outwards, drawing a small amount of blood from his arm. Abruptly he grabs my wrist and wrenches the knife from my hand. He holds it – inspecting it – then flicks his gaze to me.

He leans over me, covering me fully with his shadow and blocking out the light. As the knife slices into my face, I release a bloodcurdling scream while shooting both hands out to grip his arms.

I dig my nails into them, dragging them down heavily as spots of blood seep through the fabric of his shirt sleeves. At last he moves away from me, leaving me to curl into myself. I whimper piteously as I cover my now damaged eye with one hand.

Blood seeps through my fingers to drip onto the bed covering, forming a crimson spot as I hear him breathing heavily above me. He is still holding my switchblade in his hand, the blade coated with my blood that starts to drip onto the carpet.

The dripping echoes in my mind, even after he leaves me lying there, broken and shattered like a fine china doll.

Coming out of the harsh, cruel memory, I walk into my own bedchamber, keeping the door half-ajar in case Will, Duncan or Mischa wanted to talk to me about anything. I head into the bathroom to run the tap as I get a wash cloth, seeing my damaged eye has begun to bleed again slightly. I also retrieve my asthma inhaler and place it on the bathroom counter.

"Do you want some help?" Duncan – who I had not heard come in – says from the doorway. I turn to see he is leaning against it with his arms crossed over his muscular chest. I nod silently in reply.

He unfolds his arms and comes over to me. He takes the cloth from my hands as I turn to face him. He wets the cloth under the tap, squeezes it of excess water, then presses it gently against my damaged eye. He dabs away the blood until all I can feel is just a cool sensation against my eye. He lowers the cloth down onto the counter, then reaches up to tuck a strand of my fringe behind my ear. I catch myself licking my lips as his eyes follow the movement.

Which one of us makes the first move, I don't know. I only know that both of us stumble out of the bathroom to fall on the bed. His hands start to rip at my clothes as I do the same to him – flinging them onto the floor and not really caring where they land. Soon we are both as naked as the day we were born.

He kisses me deeply while I wrap my legs around him – one around his hips and the other in the crook of his leg. Our tongues entwine inside and outside our mouths.

I grind my hips against him, feeling his cock rub against mine deliciously, both of them leaking pearls of pre-cum onto our stomachs. His lips finally release mine, a strand of saliva connecting them as he strokes my cheek with the back of his knuckles, reassuring me everything is all right.

He bends his head down, breaking the glistening thread to kiss one of my nipples, swirling his tongue around it until it rises and peaks. He twists my other nipple in his hand, making me gasp and arch slightly off the bed cover.

His mouth is soon engulfing my nipple, licking, sucking and biting as he tweaks my other nipple in his hand. He slowly moves away from it, trailing downwards with his lips kissing every part of my body – where my heart lays thumping in my chest; my neck, where he finds a particularly sensitive spot which makes me moan wantonly; and further down to my hips. Then his large warm hands slide down my thighs to lift me up into the crook of his elbows.

Duncan looks at me, flushed and sweating, the sweat running down his body in droplets like rainwater trickling down a window pane. His lips are swollen from our kissing. The pupil of my non-damaged eye has expanded with arousal, as has his.

I twist myself onto my front, reaching into the bedside table drawer for the lube. I pour some onto my fingers and slip my hand down to my ass, brushing my lube-coated fingers against my puckered entrance, prepping myself for him. I can feel Duncan's lustful but loving gaze on me.

I slip my fingers in and out, stretching and scissoring at the same time. But it's not enough. He takes hold of my hand and pushes it out the way. He kisses his way gently down my spine, his large hands grasping my hips. When he comes to my tailbone, his hands stroke and caress my hips, massaging circles into them to relieve my tension.

It is what he does next that makes me emit a soft cry of pleasure. He spreads my ass cheeks apart to expose my twitching, puckered entrance. I feel his warm, moist tongue delving within – licking, sucking and swirling his tongue around as I find myself gripping the bed covers for support, fisting my hands into them.

He moves one hand to slip between my thighs, taking hold of my leaking cock and slowly starting to move his fist up and down. His finger rubs the tip where pearls of pre-cum are dribbling out onto the sheets, as his other hand keeps my ass cheeks spread apart. He pulls back just as I reach the cusp of the orgasm which has been building up within me.

Bereft of his touch, I begin to say something when suddenly he pulls my hips back onto his lubricated cock, fully sheathing himself inside me in a single thrust. I arch my back heavily with a breathless moan of "*Oh, fuck…Duncan!!!…Oh, oh, oh…god!!!"* He begins to move, undulating his hips back and forth at a certain pace, keeping me in a certain position on my hands and knees. Each thrust sends bolts of ecstasy surging up my spine.

In the mirrors close to the bed I can see him behind me on his knees, thrusting into me as he jolts my body back and forth on the soft satin cover of the bed. His large calloused hands grip my hips tightly to pull me back each time onto his large, pulsating cock.

It throbs inside me, filling me up each time he slips it back into my quivering insides. Finally he twists me round – still within me – and lays me down on my back, covering me completely as I writhe beneath him.

My body starts to feel strange, wicked tongues of flame caressing me. I soon succumb, arching under him, a soft keening wail pouring from my lips. I feel my thighs around his waist clench strongly as my body tenses in our lovemaking.

The pressure that has been building comes to an earth-shattering climax, blocking out everything save for the fierce beating of our hearts. I feel a distant rush of warmth fill me as our voices combine in wails of pleasure, shouting one another's names.

"*DUNCAN!!*"

"JEAN-LUC!!"

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

THE GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA

MID MORNING

WILL'S P.O.V.

Signora De Laurentis seems to be on edge for some reason when she approaches me as I sit on a bench looking at the statue of *The Rape of the Sabine Women* – portraying a man on the ground watching as the woman he loves is taken by another man who holds the woman tightly in his grasp. Her high heels click on the polished floor in the long hallway where many paintings and statues are displayed.

"Signora Ourania–Cerridwen?" she asks. I nod silently in reply. She sits down while I reach into my leather satchel and retrieve some sketches that Hannibal had done a long time ago. They are laminated so they wouldn't be spoiled.

"Thank you so much for meeting with me, signora," I say. "I would like very much to donate these sketches to the museum if at all possible. They -" I find myself struggling to keep my voice even. I take a deep breath and continue. "They were done by a dear friend of mine who - who is no longer with us. He left them to me, and frankly it is too painful for me to look at them day after day, knowing that he is -" I gulp and swallow. "- he is gone," I manage to finish.

Signora De Laurentis is perusing each sketch carefully with a practiced eye. "Signora, these are absolutely lovely! The lines, the depth of shading - superb!" She glances down at the signature. "Hannibal Lecter," she muses thoughtfully. "It seems to me I have heard that name before. He was not an established artist?"

"No, he was a psychiatrist by trade," I reply. "He loved art, and sketching was a hobby of his. One of many," I add with a small smile.

"A *hobby*?" she replies in surprise. "*Dio mio*, imagine what he could have done professionally!" She smiles warmly and continues to gaze at the sketches. "Signora, we would be honored to add these to our collection. Perhaps even arrange a small showing? These deserve to be seen by as many people as possible!"

I am taken aback in surprise and delight. My hand flutters to my chest. "Oh signora, that is too good of you! That would be wonderful, yes."

Signora De Laurentis stands. "Well, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I will retrieve the necessary paperwork and we can make this official," she says, smiling as she walks away to her office. I nod gratefully and continue to sit, staring down at the sketches in my lap. Letting

go of these treasures is painful - I have so little tangible evidence of Hannibal's presence in my life left. I have kept several that he did of me; those I will never let go. But the signora is right, these deserve to be seen and appreciated by a much wider audience.

The click of high heels can be heard in the distance, but not from the direction of the signora's office. I brush my fingers over Hannibal's sketch of the Duomo in Florence, thinking of how he often spoke of taking me there someday, when the clicking suddenly stops, not far from where I am sitting. Someone must be looking at me. Worried that I am somehow violating some rule, I glance up.

And I see.... I see....

NIMUE.

Oh my God. It can't be. It simply cannot be.

But it is. Nimue. Hannibal. Standing right in front of me. Eyes wide. Slightly trembling.

IT IS HANNIBAL!!

"Will..." he whispers. "Will... is it really you?"

I rise slowly from my seat, putting the sketches aside. My legs tremble and my breath becomes fast and shallow.

"Hannibal... yes, it's me... oh my God, I...I can't... I can't..."

Suddenly my head is spinning and my eyes are swimming in and out of focus. I think I must be falling, for Hannibal is rushing towards me shouting my name, holding out his arms.

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

THE HOTEL DANIELI

EARLY AFTERNOON

WILL'S P.O.V.

"Will... are you awake? Are you all right? Wake up now, darling. Speak to me. Oh, Will..."

I hear Hannibal's voice whispering so close to me, and feel a hand gently brushing my hair from my forehead. I slowly open my eyes and find myself in a king-size bed in a luxurious hotel room. Hannibal is curled up beside me, gazing down at me with such love and concern in his eyes. My God, it really is him. Am I dreaming?

"What... what happened? Where are we?" I say softly.

"You fainted, *mylimasis*," he replies fondly, continuing to stroke my face. "I made up some story to Signora De Laurentis about you mentioning to me that you weren't feeling well, and then you had fainted. She helped me get you into a taxi, and we came here to the Danieli Hotel. You've been out about an hour and a half. I had some food brought up for us. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I think so," I reply a bit shakily. "But Hannibal, what were you doing there? Where have you been?" I finally begin to cry. "I've missed you so much! I thought I would never see you again!" He wraps his arms around me and holds me close, cradling my head to his chest as I release the flood of tears that has been building up inside me for so long. He rocks me gently in his arms, shushing me softly and stroking my hair.

"Hush now, darling. We can discuss all of that later. All that matters now is that we are together again. And nothing will ever tear us apart again. *Ever*," he murmurs. "Oh Will, my angel. I was convinced I would never see you again as well," he continues, his voice beginning to crack. "But now you're here, and... *oh mano meile!*" And now he is crying too. We lie like this for I don't know how long, holding each other tight and weeping with joy and sorrow.

We finally part and stare at one another, smiling through our tears. Hannibal wipes first my face with a handkerchief, and then his own. "Are you hungry?" he asks, and I nod happily. He smiles and rolls the room service cart over to the bed, where we sit beside each other and enjoy a delicious meal. There is also champagne on ice, and Hannibal pours us each a glass, raising his for a toast. "To tearful, happy reunions," he declares. "And to never being parted again," I reply. We clink the glasses together and drink them down, never taking our eyes away from each other.

Hannibal rises from the bed and places the dishes and glasses back on the cart, which he rolls away to one side of the room. Then, holding me in a loving gaze, he begins to undress. Nimue is dressed so beautifully today in a purple wrap dress decorated with pink peonies. I gasp in delight when I see beneath the dress he is wearing his favorite La Perla "Crimson Love Me Tender" lingerie. And oh *GOD* I want him. I want him so badly my teeth ache. My heart pounds and my chest heaves. It's been so long, *so long*.....

"Please leave those on," I mutter hoarsely when he begins to undo his stockings. "And come here. Now."

With a wicked grin Hannibal leaps into bed and into my open arms. I suddenly realize that I am also nude save for my lingerie; I glance around and see my dress has been folded neatly on a nearby table. How considerate of him... But any further thoughts are obliterated by the feel of his warm body pressed against me, his strong arms embracing me, and his lips engulfing mine.

Dear God, I had almost forgotten what it felt like. To be held, kissed and loved by Hannibal Lecter. My blood sings in my veins as he rolls over on top of me, kissing me like it had been a small eternity since he had done so (and hadn't it been?). I wrap my arms and legs around him, lost in his overwhelming presence, his little moans and sighs, his big warm hands running all over me, his lips and tongue exploring my own.

This is perfection, this is heaven, this is ecstasy.

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Will! Will Will Will Will Will Will Will WILL!!!!!

This cannot be happening. It cannot be true. I am lying in Will's arms again, kissing him passionately and without restraint. We are entwined in each other, arms and legs and lips everywhere. I can feel his erection trapped in silk lingerie, grinding into mine. I don't believe either of us have been so hard, so wanting, so enraptured.

When I strode down the hall that morning at the museum, my only thought was to see Signora De Laurentis about a consignment that was due to arrive that day from Verona. I glanced at a lone figure sitting on the bench outside her office, and thought nothing of it. But as I approached, the figure took on familiar attributes. The faint scent of Peach Blossom Sin - *Will's favorite perfume* - wafted toward me, drawing me in like a siren's song.

At last I halted, unable to move. I felt slightly lightheaded as I took in the person before me. It - it couldn't be. Then they raised their head, and their eyes met mine, and for just a moment:

Time stopped. The world stopped.

It was Will.

The rest is a blur. Catching Will as he fainted, making up excuses to the signora, the both of us bundling Will into a taxi, cradling him against me as we sped to the hotel, carrying him to our room (mercifully on the ground floor), undressing him and putting him to bed, ordering food, lying at his side while he slept. I couldn't take my dazed eyes off of him. Will - my beautiful darling, my dearest angel, *mano meile* - he is here beside me! What I had finally given up all hope of ever happening *had* happened, and I wasn't sure if I should laugh or cry.

But right now, in Will's arms, I am beyond all thought as I lose myself in his taste, his scent, the feel of him, the sound of his breath and his voice as he emits small cries, the sight of him beneath me, his tousled hair, his elegant neck. We are still grinding our cocks together, shooting sparks of pleasure through our bodies. I think I may lose my mind.

Abruptly he pulls back and looks at me with mischief in his sparkling blue eyes. "Hannibal," he purrs, "please go fetch the ice bucket and bring it here." His smile is wickedly seductive.

Somehow I manage to pull myself away from him, leave the bed and take the ice bucket from the room service cart. I bring it back to him, my eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What are you planning, you incorrigible vixen?" I growl. He grins and snatches the bucket from my hands as I get under the covers and back into the cocoon of warmth we have created.

"You'll find out soon enough," he giggles. "Now lie there and keep still." He pushes me down onto my back, then begins kissing my neck, down my throat and onto my chest. He nuzzles into my chest hair with a sigh, and my heart nearly bursts with love for him.

He then rolls back onto his side, reaching into the bucket and placing an ice cube into his mouth. He rolls it around with his wicked tongue, gazing impishly at me the whole time. Then he slowly leans over and places his mouth over my nipple, letting the ice cube drop onto my heated skin.

"*AHH!!*" I cry as he whirls the ice around my nipple with that deft tongue of his, his eyes closed, relishing my reaction. The heat of his mouth combined with the freezing cold of the ice causes me to arch my back and throw my head back on the pillow, grasping the back of his head with one hand. I didn't think my cock could get any harder, but it does.

Without looking, he reaches back into the bucket and fetches another ice cube, popping it into his mouth. He drags the ice cube, clutched in his teeth, across my chest and over to the other nipple, which receives the same treatment, this time with some gentle biting. I officially enter a state of frenzy.

Without warning I flip Will onto his back and reach over to retrieve the lube I had propitiously placed on the bedside table. He grins as he shimmies off his silken knickers, strips off his stockings and spreads his legs, allowing me access to his warm entrance. His cock lies proudly on his belly, and as I kneel between his legs I can't help but lean down and take it into my mouth, deep-throating it several times and then holding it inside, swallowing and letting him feel my throat muscles contracting around it. He throws himself back on the pillow with a high-pitched keen. "*Oh God, Hannibal... Yes! Yes! Aaaahhh!*" His cries are music to my ears. I slowly release him, then yank down my own knickers just enough to free my cock from its confines. I slick up my cock and his, then trail my fingers down between his cheeks and into his waiting entrance, slicking it up too and getting him used to the feel again.

"Oh Hannibal, please, please.... Fuck me now, I can't wait any longer," he gasps.

I hoist his lovely legs up around my waist, spread his cheeks, line myself up, and do just that.

I honestly can't tell you how long it lasts or give you any specific details. I have entered into some kind of primitive pre-verbal state, my mind closed off from rational thought. All I can tell you is that there is *so much* thrusting, grinding, grunting, gasping, moaning, kissing, biting, squeezing, clawing, licking, sucking. The mattress bounces and the headboard rattles. Our bodies seem to be melting together into one heaving, sweating monster - the beast with two backs.

The pleasure and the pressure and the passion and the ecstasy are building up, up, *up*, until our bodies can no longer contain them and they burst from us in the forms of white ropes of cum, loud roars and cries, beads of sweat, and waves of heat and energy. It is the closest thing to a religious experience I have ever had.

We collapse in a heap of skin, muscle and bone; blood, sweat and tears. We hold each other gently, weeping into one another's skin, whispering words of love.

We are conjoined. Our reunion has consummated it. We are one being now, and we can never be separated. Never.

Everything Beautiful In Its Time

Chapter Summary

> He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
>
> - Ecclesiastes 3:11

LOCATION – FLORENCE, ITALY

THE FIRENZE ALLEYWAYS

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

My lungs are burning from all the running I've just done to get away from the strange black man who, after shouting "***DIMMOND!"*** , chased after me when my response had been *flight* due to the panic that risen within me at such levels it had left me with two choices:

Flight.

Or Fight.

Because of my panicked state, I had chosen *Flight.* I had no alternative but to leave Lucien and Markus behind – my dear boys who are not able to speak a word of English, or even Italian if they are questioned. Breathing deeply in and out to calm myself while my heart rate soon resumes its normal pace, I begin to think.

I have to get Lucien and Markus back. They will be frightened, alone in an unfamiliar country, surrounded by people they don't know speaking an unknown language. Markus, being so young and without me there to comfort him, could easily experience a panic attack.

To him I was like a *security blanket* – always there when he had a nightmare, giving him hugs when he wanted them, and telling him bedtime stories when he asked for one. I know that Lucien, his older brother, will be able to help him, but even he is prone to anxiety attacks. Once I had left him alone in the car to get something I had forgotten in the small kiosk of our Icelandic hometown, and he reacted very badly.

Looking around the alleyway, I try to see if there is a way out of it and think back to the route I had taken. But all that comes to mind are fractured pieces of it: the strange black man

shouting the unfamiliar name I never heard - "***Dimmond!" -*** passing a group of tourists, and finally losing whoever they were through the back alleyways of Florence. I was now stuck in one of those many alleyways because I didn't know how to get out.

Sifting both hands through my hair, I curse heavily under my breath in another language. I had been told by the doctor who had diagnosed me with a serious case of amnesia that it was Greek, spoken on the island of Thassos, in the small town of Crietos.

Why couldn't I remember anything of that place, though?

Why were my memories so fractured like this?

What had happened to me to make them this way?

"Excuse me. Is everything alright, signore?" a voice – Japanese or Asian, I can't tell – asks me, drawing me out of those internal questions that may never be answered. I turn my face to the source of the voice.

A woman, wearing simple plain clothes – hunter styled – and carrying over one shoulder a long metallic case, which she holds the strap of with one fine, delicate hand, is standing there. She had appeared from nowhere, as far as I can see.

"I…No, not really. I…just…" I begin to say, wrapping my arms around myself and leaning against the faded red-brick wall of the alleyway. "I worry for my nephews. I came here because I remembered something important from my past."

"You sound as though you have lost your past in some way," the strange woman states. I couldn't help but agree with her words, and since there is no one else around, I decide to open up to her.

"I have. I was diagnosed with a serious case of amnesia, and so I can't remember anything at all of it. It is…frustrating for me, not to be able to recollect even a single memory."

She gives a small *"hmm*" at that and looks away, seeming to be thinking about something. She flicks her gaze back to me. I must look like I very much need someone to help me recover my memories and get Lucien and Markus back.

"Where are your…*nephews*……now?" she asks me. I sigh wearily as I remember the black man had shouted to an Asian woman to keep an eye on Lucien and Markus before he chased after me.

"With some Americans. They had an F.B.I. insignia on their blue jackets, and one of them thought I was someone they had met or seen before. I panicked when they shouted a name at me I didn't recognize," I reply, wondering if I should even be giving such information to this female stranger.

For all I know, she could easily be a serial killer who pretends to befriend men and then get rid of them. She could kill me if she wanted to.

Yet, gut instinct is telling me I can trust her and, if she is willing, could ask her if she could help me get back Lucien and Markus. But she takes the thought out of my head by asking, "*Do you wish for some help?* " I nod gratefully in reply.

The strange woman tells me her name is Chiyoh Okasaki, once bodyguard to Lady Murasaki, who is still alive and now living in Okinawa, Japan. Chiyoh is like no other woman I have met in my life, with the way she portrays herself as both of us now walk to the *Polizia Di Firenze* headquarters.

It is where she says she had seen Lucien and Markus being taken by the strange black man who is called Jack Crawford, head of the F.B.I.'s Behavioral Science Unit. The name pings a deep fractured memory within my mind.

But before I can grasp it, it disappears. Chiyoh mentions the man was in Florence because he was looking for two people that had gone missing from Baltimore, Maryland in America – Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham.

Something about those names causes a far distant memory to rise from the depths of my fractured mind. Soon I am dragged into the Greek play of my Mind Palace.

The swirling, wreathing mists of the open amphitheater part to reveal a Roman sitting area with chaise lounges, small tables ladened with food and wine, while people in togas, wearing masks on their faces, laugh and chat among themselves – like snakes slithering over each other to keep warm – as I walk into the space.

Close by is a large black man wearing the Mask of Guilt and a laurel crown, indicating someone of great status. Yet, I can see the leaves are faded slightly.

I look around at the other patrons of the party, trying to spot among them the one that wears the Mask of Sorrow, bearing a solitary tear running down the cheek of the mask.

Soon they appear from the mists on the other side of the large room, walking over to me and embracing me. I allow them to lead me over to a private area where they help me lay down on the chaise lounge.

Another figure appears from the mists, wearing a Mask of a Grief – it also has on it a solitary tear – and walks over to join me and the person wearing the Mask of Sorrow. Abruptly their arm is grabbed by the figure wearing the Mask of Guilt, with the faded laurel crown on their head.

Both begin to speak in hushed voices.

"This must not continue. It is forbidden."

"It is not your decision, ***Jack.*** *He has the right to choose who he wishes to love."*

"Do you wish to anger the Gods? This cannot go on forever."

Not wanting to hear any more, I turn my face away to look at the figure wearing the Mask of Sorrow, with the solitary tear running down one cheek. I reach forward with my hand to pull off the mask.

I wish to see the face beneath - only for real life to come slamming back in before I can.

"Signore and Signora Ishima," a voice says, bringing me out of the Greek play of my Mind Palace and back into the real world. I see a man standing in front of his office – a detective by the look of him. I stand up with Chiyoh while she holds my hand in hers, giving the impression that we are a couple.

"Yes," I reply, willing my heart to stop thudding against my rib cage and hoping our act will convince the detective to let me see Lucien and Markus.

"I'm Detective Rinaldo Pazzi. I heard you wish to visit the young boys that were brought in today. I'm guessing you are related in some way," he states. Something about this man convinces me he is not well known for his reputation but more for the unscrupulous deals he makes behind his superiors' backs.

"Aunt and uncle. We got so concerned when we couldn't find them," I reply, feeling Chiyoh lean close to pretend to whisper in my ear. "Please, may we see them? My wife and I have been so fraught with worry when we couldn't find them."

"Come this way," Detective Pazzi says, indicating to us to follow him to where Lucien and Markus were being held in an interview room.

LOCATION – FLORENCE, ITALY

POLIZIA DI FIRENZE - INTERVIEW ROOM 5

LUCIEN'S P.O.V.

"It's all right, Markus……Dimitri will come back for us. He will. I know he will come back for us both."

I find myself whispering to Markus while rocking him back and forth to comfort him as we sit in the corner of the interview room. We had been brought there by the strange black man who had caused Dimitri to run away.

Who were they?

What do they want with us?

I want Dimitri here. I want Dimitri here.

Sifting my hand through my little brother's hair, I bury my face into the crook of his neck and keep on repeating the mantra in my head - *Dimitri will come back for us*. Suddenly I hear muffled voices in the corridor, and the sound of a familiar voice makes us both raise our heads at the same time.

The door is pushed open to reveal him standing there, with someone else close to him. But it is only him that both of us get up and rush over to, our voices breaking with equal emotion when he holds his arms out to us.

"DIMITRI!!!"

We throw ourselves into his embrace, and I can hear him saying *"I'm here…Everything is all right… I'm here, Lucien, Markus. I'm here,"* reassuring himself, Markus and I that everything is going to be all right now.

LOCATION – VENICE, ITALY

THE HOTEL DANIELI

APPROACHING DAWN

WILL'S P.O.V.

"Hannibal…do you have to go? Can't we just run away now? Leave and never come back."

"I…. wish it were that easy, mylimasis. Oh, Will…just being with you again…. I have no words to describe it."

Hannibal, fresh from the shower and still with droplets of water from his damp hair running down his body, calmly slips back on his La Perla "*Crimson Love Me Tender"* lingerie with simple ease, then reaches for his purple wrap dress decorated with pink peonies.

Slipping out from under the covers of the large hotel bed, I go around it and behind him to help him slip the dress back on. After it is sorted, I embrace him from behind as he leans back against me.

"I don't want you to leave. Not after we just found each other again, Hannibal," I say, kissing his shoulder tenderly as we stand close to the bed where we had consummated our reunion after being separated from one another for so long. "I worry if you go back, this will be the last time I see you because of that vile snake of a man."

His hand, which rests over mine on his chest, brings it up to his lips to kiss each knuckle gently, reassuring me he will be all right – even though we both know if Augustuv found out I was alive, Hannibal could be beaten up or even worse, trapped, so that he could never be free from the clutches of this man.

He had told me everything: *Meeting Coquille at the Palazzo Caponi in Florence, where he been working as Mr. Roman Fell; finding out the man was the son of the deceased Vladimir Grutas – the man who had murdered his sister for meat and forced him to eat her; their wedding night, when he was ultimately raped by the man because he was afraid for Abigail's safety; finding out our dear sweet Anthony was the man's half-brother and had been murdered in front of Hannibal's very eyes by Coquille; and finally being brought here to Venice, where unexpectedly the man had confessed his love to Hannibal.*

"I know, *mano meile.* I wish I could stay as well and wake up beside you, and we could kiss and hold each other. But if I don't leave now, Augustuv…. Please, Will, he is still my husband….and you're hurting me," Hannibal declares as I snarl at him for saying the snake's name and see I have gripped his wrists tightly. Releasing them, I bring my hands up to gently hold his shoulders instead.

"Sorry, it's just... Hearing you say his name, Hannibal, the name of the man who has hurt you so badly and taken Anthony away from us. It just makes me want to confront him and place my hands around his throat. But I don't know if even doing that will be enough," I grumble. He turns in my arms to face me and smiles softly, while taking a deep breath to say his next words.

"Know that I love you so much. Even when I laid with him, all I thought of was you and Anthony. Not him. Just you and…sweet, darling Anthony," he admits, his voice breaking. I pull him in for one last kiss before he leaves me standing there, feeling like he has taken part of me with him.

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

COQUILLE'S PRIVATE RESIDENCE

EARLY DAWN

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Everything is silent, save for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the downstairs hallway, as I quietly reach the landing, holding the high-heeled shoes I had been wearing in both hands. I walk silently down the hall to my and Augustuv's bedchamber.

Reaching it, I step within just as I suddenly start to feel light-headed. I remember the Venetian doctor telling me not to over-exert myself, even though the worst of the fever from being out in the rain for five whole days had broken.

Five whole days I had spent in the back alleyways of Venice, stealthily hunting and dispatching any rude, obnoxious people I had come across. I recalled how I had displayed their bodies to show what they actually had hidden under their *"person suits*".

Starting to unwrap my dress, I am walking over to the wardrobe when my vision chooses abruptly to go in and out of focus, causing me to stumble slightly. At the same time I hear distantly something like a vase or a glass falling off the table I had brushed past and drop to the floor with a tinkling crash.

"Nimue, is that you, darling?" I hear Augustuv – who must have just come from his study – call from the hallway as I find myself collapsing onto the floor, landing on my knees. I am feeling so drained suddenly, and I can't understand why. He soon appears in the doorway and rushes over to me.

Gently, he hauls me up onto my feet and checks my temperature with the back of his hand. He leads me into the bathroom adjoining our shared bedchamber, and I hear him running the tap, moving my hand to place it under the cold water. It seems that when I had stumbled into the table and collapsed, I had managed to cut myself on the shards of the broken vase.

Some of the shards had become embedded in the palm of my hand. He opens the bathroom cabinet to retrieve a pair of tweezers and a bandage, then leads me out of the bathroom and over to the window seat where the light is better.

"*Where have you been? You missed dinner with Miss Lounds, who for the foreseeable future won't be taking any photographs or recordings without anyone's explicit permission."*

"*I'm sorry for getting home so late, Augustuv. The paperwork for the consignment from Verona took up most of yesterday afternoon and evening to finish."*

Both of us sit on the window seat as he calmly wraps the bandage around my hand. I start to say something when I wince and pull my hand back slightly, and he turns his gaze up to me.

"Sorry, my sweet," he apologizes, unwrapping the bandage and starting again. "I understand perfectly; you must finish your work. But you must remember what Dr. Ewis said – don't over-exert yourself."

Finished with wrapping the bandage, he keeps my hand on his lap, as if he is concerned that if he lets go I will harm myself again by accident. I remember that when my fever had broken, Dr. Ewis had said something that was the height of rudeness.

"Is this also the same doctor who commented in a rather crude way behind your back on our lack of 'bedroom activities,' and how my *cunt* must not be 'wet enough for you to fuck me,'

when my fever finally broke and we had a few days to ourselves?" I ask, an unmistakable hint of anger in my voice. He flicks his gaze back up to me, lost in thought about something, and reaches up with his free hand to cup my cheek softly.

"If only…my sweet, if only he knew what you had hidden under our bed covers. He would be rephrasing 'she' to 'he' because of it," he says, chuckling at the audacity of Dr. Ewis believing I was a female. He pulls me into a gentle kiss.

The kiss soon becomes bolder, and he soon pushes me down to lay on the window seat among the fine silk pillows decorated with spreading fern-like tendrils, snowbells and bluebells. Our lips begin to move against each other, changing position each time to deepen the kissing.

I can't help but think of yesterday afternoon, when I had lain with Will and made love to him. I know this must be the final time Augustuv and I share making love together – even though part of me will regret it and want it back.

LOCATION – VENICE, ITALY

THE GRAND CANAL

APPROACHING MID MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

The calm waters of Venice are liquid silver, while white froth rises from the *vaporetto* as we head to the Dorsoduro district for some unknown reason. All Augustuv has told me is, "*Don't worry. It is nothing bad. I have just planned something that would have been for our wedding anniversary."*

Today he wears a long soft-brown coat with a fake white fur trim collar and a beautiful suit, which I had insisted upon buying for him when he had taken me shopping previously. I wear an eggshell blue dress that splits at the hem, and a white silk scarf with a fiery opal brooch clipped on it around my neck.

Beneath my dress is the La Perla collection "*Crème de Desire"* – a corset which he had laced up himself, stroking my hip at the same time through the lace thongs, as we stood near the wardrobe mirror. Due to the cold weather Venice is beginning to experience, as it is approaching winter, I am wearing over it all a warm new coat in a soft sandy gold color, with fake fur-fleeced lining.

Feeling jealous eyes on me at my rich appearance, I find myself snuggling close to Augustuv, who smiles softly as we sit on benches outside the cabin of the *vaporetto*, where tourists not used to the cold sit within.

"Hmm, what are you thinking about, my darling Nimue? If it is the tourists, jealous because of your looks, then they can be so. Only I understand your beauty," he murmurs, quietly enough for me to hear, as the water taxi begins to turn into the entryway to the Dorsoduro district.

Yes, you do. But so do Will – alive and well - and Anthony, who you murdered before my eyes. They understand me perhaps more than you think you understand me.

If only Anthony was alive, then everything would be like it was before… before you started to lock me in a gilded cage.

The Dorsoduro is thankfully not as busy today like the Piazza San Marco, with only some tourists walking around enjoying the sights. Augustuv comes back over to me, handing me a warm cup of *caffè macchiato* from one of the *caffetterie* that open early for commuters.

"Signora De Laurentiis called me last night," he says, while I take a sip of the coffee - which is not like the muck I had had at previous cafes I had visited in my youth – and indicate for him to continue as we walk. "It seems a very kind person has donated some sketches to the *Gallerie dell'Accadémia,* so she has planned a public viewing this coming Saturday evening."

"Have we both been invited? She knows how enthusiastic and passionate I am about some artworks," I say as he strokes my hip with the hand that is wrapped around my waist. I wonder if this is the surprise that Will had mentioned to me, refusing to reveal any more when I had asked what he was planning.

"Yes of course, darling. It's an unknown artist though, so it will be interesting to see what they look like and maybe get a hint of who sketched them," he replies, leading me down an alleyway, across a bridge and around a corner, where I see, well set back from the expensive shops, an art shop with a sign above an old-fashioned doorway.

Lettering on the sign in a certain font reveals the name "*Signor Innachio's Art Studio, Shop and Emporium."* Augustuv opens the door and leads me inside to reveal what an old Venetian art shop might have looked like during the Classical period. I find myself walking over to have a look at some of the artwork hanging on the wall.

There are many great reproductions of classic works, by an artist who is obviously a master of his skills. I can see the only way they could not be fully mistaken for the originals is that he adds a small detail into each one – a tiny golden stamp with his name written in it in such small handwriting that one would have to have keen vision to spot it.

"Now you know why I brought you here. But it is not only because of Signor Innachio's paintings, my sweet," he says, kissing my neck at the same time he slips one hand upwards to cup one of my nipples through both the dress and corset in such a sensuous way that I cannot repress a hitched gasp.

“Augustuv…. You…want…to paint me. As a late wedding anniversary gift to me? Why?” I manage to say. He places his other hand on my hip, close to the split hem near my thigh, where the lace of my thongs rests as well.

“Yes, dearest. Why, naturally because of your beauty and those eyes of yours. I wish to capture it by painting you,” Augustuv replies. He would have gone further if it hadn’t been for Signor Innachio thankfully appearing before he can.

“Ahhh, Mr. Coquille!” the small man says in such a fake-delightful voice it irks me immediately. Augustuv, who manages to make it look like he hadn't just had his hands all over me, allows himself to be kissed on both cheeks by him. “It is such a pleasure to see you again. Oh, and who this beautiful woman?” he continues, noticing me. I start to answer when Augustuv gets in before me.

As if he is somehow worried I might say something out of turn.

“Nimue-Lurisa Venomis Coquille, my wife,” he replies. I feel my hand taken up and kissed with cocaine-stained lips. I quickly pull my hand away with an apologetic smile. Signor Innachio frowns at Augustuv.

“How strange. The last time I saw you was with the prominent casino owner who…lo…. *arghhh!!!*” Signor Innachio is violently interrupted by my husband, who grabs the small man around the throat and leads him upstairs. I walk apprehensively to the foot of the stairs, listening for any hints that his anger has snapped.

Instead I only hear harsh whispers, Augustuv snarling and Signor Innachio sounding more like the whining addict he is, coming from a room close to the stairs.

“*I thought that after that night I do not wish to remember,* ***you*** *would remember not to mention my ex-husband ever again, Orvilino! Or would you prefer I reveal to the Venetian police that one of their informants is stealing cocaine from their evidence room?"*

“No…no, Signore Coquille……I apologize. It’s just……they look so like him in a way.”

“My wife Nimue is nothing like my ex-husband. Do you understand what I’m saying, or shall I make sure you do?”

“Yes, Signore Coquille……I understand very much. I……think I need some fresh air. The studio is free for you to use.”

“Thank you.”

As I hear their exchange come to a close, I walk quickly back to the paintings. In my haste, I accidentally knock over some fine-china mugs on a table and they fall to the floor, smashing into a thousand fragile pieces. I remember the time Abigail had dropped the teacup – after I had given her a special mushroom tea to help calm her nerves – then quickly set about collecting the pieces as I hear them both coming down the stairs.

Augustuv walks me inside the art studio, which is large enough for a class of twelve people. There are large windows on each side of the room to allow light in. I can see there is also an ocular window above, painted around its edges with Venetian masks. A faded chaise lounge with pillows on it is in the center, along with an artist's easel and canvas.

As I approach the chaise lounge, I find myself biting my bottom lip as my cheeks heat up with the memory of Augustuv and I on our own chaise lounge in his private Venetian residence – which had also become my home. One of his large hands takes hold of my hip, and I turn to look at him as he cups my cheek with his free hand and strokes my cheekbone with his thumb.

“I didn’t know you could paint, Augustuv. Who taught you? Or is that…too personal a question?” I ask. He pulls away from me to slip off my coat, going over to a small closet and hanging it up gently. He removes his coat and suit jacket, then begins to roll up his shirt sleeves, placing his cuff links in his coat pocket.

“My mother – Corina-Oventina Coquille – taught me to paint, just plain, simple things at first, then people and animals. She died just after my sixteenth birthday – suicide by drinking hemlock. I never found out why,” he adds softly. I go over to him and place my hands on his chest. He takes hold of my hands to bring both up to his lips instead.

“Oh, Augustuv…that is so…...I didn’t know. To be only that age, so young, going upstairs to tell her to come down. Only…to find her… lying in bed, so pale, and yet looking like she was asleep. I’m so…sorry for causing you so much grief, anguish and pain after all this time,” I hear myself saying, while within my mind part of me screams “*Why are you sympathizing with this man? He hurt you badly, and could still!”* He lifts both hands to my cheeks.

“Nimue…Nimue, my darling…...look at me?” he suddenly says, and I wonder when I had stopped paying attention to him. I look at him, feeling myself needing something to ground me as he thankfully says it for me. “Do you want me to... make love to you? Fill you... until you're happy and sated in my arms?”

I nod silently in reply, grasping his hand to lead him over to the chaise lounge. He gently pushes me down to lie among the pillows as both of us slowly and tenderly begin to slip off each other's clothes.

“Nimue…don’t move…Stay… just like you are,”

Augustuv says when I start to shift slightly to stretch my body. Fluttering my eyes open, I see he is in his boxer shorts, sitting at the canvas calmly painting. He shifts his gaze to me,

looking straight at me as sunlight chooses the most perfect time to shine down from the ocular window to where I lay.

“Don’t move just yet. I’m nearly finished,” he tells me when my desire to see how he has represented me shows in my eyes. Finally, swirling his paint brush in the glass jar of water on the small stool next to him, he beckons me over to have a look.

I slowly rise from the chaise lounge, wincing slightly from the residual pleasant ache from our lovemaking. I keep the blanket wrapped around me like a toga, then wait as he moves the little stool out of the way. I walk over in my bare feet to see what he has painted.

My heart skips a beat. He pulls me down to sit in his lap and hold me as I stare breathlessly at the painting he has done. It shows me lying on the chaise lounge, sunlight shining down from the ocular window, in a post-coital bliss pose and looking straight at whoever looks at the painting.

“*It’s beautiful…. It’s…. beautiful,"*

I hear myself saying. He embraces me from behind, kissing my cheek so tenderly, while his hand clasps mine which bears his ring.

But the Name of the Wicked Shall Rot

Chapter by UnknownMusing

Chapter Summary

The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot.

- Proverbs 10:7

CW: Adult rape of underage Hannibal

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

CHIYOH'S PRIVATE RESIDENCE, ACROSS FROM THE GRAND HOTEL MINERVA

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

Chiyoh thankfully doesn't ask me any questions about what had transpired between myself and Agent Jack Crawford in one of the interview rooms of the *Polizia di Firenze* headquarters, after I had been reunited with Lucien and Markus. I would have quickly and happily departed with them, leaving this all behind, if I hadn't been stopped by the large black man.

The memory of what had transpired comes to mind as we head upstairs to Chiyoh's private apartment, with Lucien and Markus holding both her hands to resume the facade of her being their auntie.

"DIMITRI!!"

Hearing them both cry out my name with such emotion in their little voices causes my eyes to well up with tears. I clasp Lucien and Markus to me, feeling them bury their faces into my chest, sobbing heavily with joy, relief and happiness in seeing me again.

At last I feel the suffocating worry I would never see them again seep away to nothing. Gently, I kiss the crowns of their heads, whispering like a mantra:

“I’m here……Everything is all right…. I’m here, Lucien, Markus. I’m here.”

It is to reassure them (and myself) that everything is going be all right and I would never leave them alone again. Finally we leave the interview room and join Chiyoh, who I quickly introduce to the boys, promising I will explain all later. We all troupe down the hallway, the boys clinging to both my hands. We head down the flight of steps and across the polished marble floor.

Just before we reach the double doors leading out of the Polizia di Firenze, we are suddenly stopped by the large black man who Chiyoh had told me was Agent Jack Crawford. He appears to want to talk to me.

“Signore Ishima, may I talk to you? It will not take long,” the large black man says. I now have two choices: Leave with Chiyoh and the boys and never return; or go with this man and hear what he has to say.

Even though my mind is conflicted, I make my decision and hope it will provide answers for me, instead of more confusion.

“YOU'RE LYING!! IT…..”

“I’m sorry, but this who you really are.”

Breathing heavily, I find myself getting up out of the seat to walk away from the table where Agent Crawford has laid out photos of the man he says I actually am - a man called Anthony Dimmond, originally from the island of Thassos and born in the small town of Crietos.

Other photos are also on the table near my profile picture, showing me helping a beautiful person in a black dress with golden ginkgo leaves to their car. The dress has been torn as if something had happened to them. Another photo shows me arriving at a private party with the same person, only they wear this time a long black one-shoulder evening dress decorated with white and lapis lazuli roses on the neckline, plus what seems to be a choker around their neck made of pearls – real ones.

“You don’t understand. I don’t remember anything….at all…about my past, Agent Crawford," I tell him. He lifts his head and frowns. “You have to understand…I have been diagnosed with a serious case of amnesia.”

*Wrapping my arms around myself, I walk over to the table to look down at the other photos spread about on the metal surface. One of the photos shows my unknown self just about to disembark from a boat called the **" Erienades"** with a strange person with fine, distinct cheekbones, as another person from my past life I was trying so hard to remember stands by, watching my past self and this person depart.*

Something about their faces and eyes, delicate and hypnotic, brings a broken memory to the surface: Whispers of love, breathless cries, pants and gasps as bodies connect intimately.

Maroon and sea blue-green eyes stare deeply into my own, as if they could peer into my soul.

“Even if my memories return, I don’t know whether I will be able to tell if they actually happened or are a fantasy my mind has created. And I might not want to tell you, even if that happens," I say, finding myself tracing the face of the strange person with maroon eyes and fine cheekbones. It is awakening a deep, fractured memory in my mind.

“Dimmond…,” Crawford begins, noticing how I shift my gaze up to him when he says the strange name. “There is a way I can help you. If you come back to Baltimore with us, I can ensure that the best doctors will be on hand to help you recover your memories.”

The way he says this, however, isn’t convincing me. Seeing how he is looking off into the distance, lost in though, I stealthily slip one the photos of myself with the strangers – Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter – into my pocket.

Perhaps I could ask Chiyoh if she knows who they are, and if she has any information on them.

“No, thank you. I would prefer it if you would just let me find out things for myself, with no interference from you or even the Polizia di Firenze," I state firmly.

I turn to the door and open it, looking back one last time at the large black man. He is still occupied by his thoughts, his hands clasped together. I step out into the corridor, closing the door gently behind me.

Coming out of the memory, I see we have arrived at Chiyoh's apartment. She calmly opens the door to allow myself, Lucien and Markus to step into the foyer. Further down the hallway, bamboo screen doors lead into the sitting room.

As Chiyoh slides them open, she reveals a Japanese mixed with Venetian-styled sitting room. There is an adjoining kitchen and more bamboo screen doors, which Chiyoh tells me lead to the sleeping quarters.

She also introduces me to her other guests, Francis Dolarhyde and Reba McClane, who have brought with them… *Pepilo!!!* .....causing excited cries to come from both Lucien and Markus, who rush over to embrace him.

The sight makes me smile. Dolarhyde (or Francis, as he insists I call him) and Reba’s dogs - Chilo, Mafo and Cochilla (or Chilla, depending on how the bitch behaved) – make an appearance to introduce themselves.

Francis leads me over to the kitchen island counter, and we seat ourselves on bar stools and start to make small talk. Reba and Chiyoh begin to prepare a Japanese noodle dish with stir-fried vegetables and sushi.

“You seem to be on edge still. How come?” Francis asks me, placing his empty tumbler down on a coaster on the kitchen island. He reaches into my pocket and pulls out the photo of myself with the two strange men – Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham – taken in a hidden cove near the island of Thassos.

He unfolds the photo and peruses it. His gaze snaps up to me when he sees who is in the picture, then sighs, resigned. He knows who they are.

“Agent Crawford wanted me to go back with him to Baltimore. He said he would get the best doctors to help me recover my memories,” I reply, picking up my tumbler of brandy on the rocks and taking a sip to calm my nerves.

He places the photo down on the counter, looking thoughtful. An exclamation of frustration from Lucien makes me turn my head to watch he and Markus relaxing (or at least trying to) by putting together a one thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle on the coffee table. All of the dogs are sleeping soundly beside them. It would take all of the boys' concentration and patience to complete the puzzle, I had no doubt.

“There…well…there is another way,” Francis says cautiously. I turn my gaze away from the boys and give him a questioning look. “It is what some doctors consider an unethical treatment, and yet it does help recover memories.”

I intend to ask him for more information, but decide to keep it for later as Reba asks us both to set the table; dinner is ready.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Francis asks me, concern in his voice as we sit in my guest sleeping quarters. We watch as Chiyoh, wearing a fine silk night kimono decorated with cranes bearing different flowers on their wings as wispy Japanese smoke clouds surround them, prepares a needle filled with sodium amytal – a drug which was more likely to be used in places like the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

“If it is the only other way, then…yes Francis, I'm ready,” I reply, closing my eyes and taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm myself. I can feel Chiyoh taking hold of my arm and seeking the proper vein. She soon finds it, the syringe needle sliding into the vein and the plunger slowly releasing the sodium amytal into my bloodstream. I suddenly gasp loudly at the rush of it.

My heart rate is accelerating, and my blood feels like it is boiling within my body. I find my eyes slipping closed as I’m quickly dragged deep down into the abyss of my shattered memories, on their way to healing.

* * * * * *

An underground bar - in Baltimore, Maryland, I think - filled with the haze of curling, writhing cigarette smoke and the soft, glowing light from lilly-shaped lamps in sconces on the walls, begins to form in front of my eyes. Soon I see my past self – Anthony Dimmond –

*standing close to one of the strangers in the photo I had stolen from Jack Crawford – Hannibal Lecter, in his **Nimue** persona. They are wearing a black dress with golden ginkgo leaves on it, sitting on a bar stool pretend-weeping over an incident that has just occurred.*

*"Miss **Nimue** , at least let one of us escort you back to your car, in case…in case Garvin comes back and tries to hurt you again."*

"You're too kind, all of you. But thank you, I think I'll be able to manage all right on my own now."

*I hear myself saying to the group of young men,"I would be happy to escort Miss **Nimue** , with their permission." Hannibal nods silently in reply and places his hand on my arm. There is no mistaking that **Nimue** and Hannibal are the same person, due to those fine cheekbones and hauntingly beautiful maroon eyes. Then the scene changes. My past self and **Nimue** /Hannibal are outside. They wear over the poor tattered dress – having been ripped during the assault by the swine Garvin - a soft fake fur coat. The first snowflakes of winter in Baltimore start to spiral down from the dark sky. I follow Dimmond and **Nimue** to their car, almost like a ghost walking beside them.*

*I see the first kiss shared between us – gentle and soft – and myself saying "No, sweetheart. You keep it. I get loads for Christmas from my Aunt Marisa, who runs a café in Venice, Italy," when my past self indicates to **Nimue** to keep the handkerchief.*

* * * * * *

Waltz music played by a string quartet pulls me into the next scene. Double gilded glass doors open to reveal a ballroom filled with guests of the prominent Mayor of Crietos – my sexually-abusive Uncle Kronos Dimmond, it seems, from what my memories are telling me; he had ruined my life right up until my sixteenth birthday – mingling through the room. Some are dancing, while others wander about sipping champagne or cocktails.

*I see my past self with **Nimue** , dancing right in the centre of the swirling circle. It calls to mind a vision of fish swimming slowly around and around in the ocean.*

They look so beautiful in this memory, wearing a long black one-shouldered evening dress with white and lapis lazuli roses that curve down to embrace their hips. Earrings of lapis lazuli dangle and sway from their ears.

*Another detail is the choker bedecked with pearls, a gift from the other strange person in my life – **Pearl-Lace ,** or Will Graham as they were known.*

*I hear my confession of wanting to marry both **Nimue** and **Pearl-Lace: "Nimue,** there is something.... I want to say to you. Even though.... you still wear his wedding ring, I....want...to marry both you and **Pearl-Lace**, so I'll never lose either of you."*

The deep love I have for them, and from them, overwhelms me, and my eyes sting with unshed tears.

* * * * * *

More memories follow, revealing all to me with such noise and clarity it is difficult to bear. I flinch at the sight of myself being stabbed by Augustuv-Magnus Coquille – my half-brother – who had forced ***Nimue*** *to marry him after he developed an interest in them during* ***Nimue's*** *time in Florence. I am left with the scar that is so close to my heart, and remember I had tried to say something to him.*

Blood had been filling my mouth at the time, and the pain from the knife was searing. Bringing my hand up, I force the ripple of memory back a bit until I am grabbing hold of his arm and attempting to speak.

Stepping close, I lower my hand and watch my past self's lips form the words:

"Don't let it control you. Don't let the Inner Serpent take over you completely."

His eyes widen and he pulls the knife from my chest. I sink into unconsciousness.

* * * * * *

I now come to the horrifying conclusion that my ending up on a beach in Reykjavik had been due to him throwing me overboard from his ship, the ***"Sedah,"*** *which if one read it backwards, spells*

Hades.

* * * * * *

I return to normal consciousness more peacefully, certainly, than an inmate of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane might. I thank Francis for remaining with me. He hugs me gently with a smile and disappears into the guest bedroom he shares with Reba. I feel like I need a drink and something to eat. The effects of the drug and the memory-healing process have drained me of energy.

A lamp has been lit in the sitting room, and I see Chiyoh is awake – kneeling at an altar which bears incense sticks and a picture of a beautiful Japanese woman wearing the old traditional kimono robes from a time when samurai warriors still roamed Japan, and emperors sought out their services.

The jigsaw puzzle the boys had been working on is nearly complete, amazingly enough. I find the location of the missing three pieces when I nearly step on them. Picking them up, I calmly slot the pieces into place. The puzzle portrays the scene of a group of samurai preparing for war in their woodland area camp: one is being assisted by his servant to fit on his armor; another, who must also be a cook, is catching fish from the river; and many other activities too numerous to recount.

Heading to the kitchen, I see there still remains some of the dinner Reba and Chiyoh had prepared. I place some in bowls for myself and for Chiyoh, in gratitude for helping me recover my memories. I retrieve some chopsticks and walk over as she calmly closes the altar dedicated to this important Japanese woman.

“How do you feel?” she asks, taking the ornate bowl I hand to her and the chopsticks with Japanese lettering carved on them – one pair reads Strength and Honor, and the other Sorrow and Regret.

I am surprised to see that she takes the second pair, and I wonder what she sorrows for and what she regrets.

“I remember… everything. Everything that happened to me and why. It…just… I don’t know where **Nimue** and **Pearl-Lace** are now. Do you know where they are?” I reply, lying about not knowing because I want to see if she has the same answer in mind that I do: “*Venice.”*

She doesn’t answer, but instead reaches for a teapot and pours some tea into a fine-china cup. She hands it to me, indicating that I should drink the tea, but leave the dregs within the cup.

Reading tea leaves is an ancient Japanese method of divination. I am not skeptical about it and understand it is her way of grounding herself.

“*You…will meet them again. At a place where many great artworks hang in a strange city surrounded by water and boats of all shapes and sizes. Be…wary though…. the Coiling Serpent will be lurking in the shadows. Stay where a hotel bears the Mask of Amusement when you reach the place where Nimue and Pearl-Lace are.”*

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

COQUILLE'S PRIVATE RESIDENCE

FRIDAY - LATE EVENING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

“*Is that all right, Mrs. Nimue? I haven’t made it too tight, have I?”*

“Of course not, Lilly. At least it’s not a corset made from whale bone like the Victorian ones. Look, see?…even Mrs. Nimue is pleased with your work.”

Mrs. Agatha Guthrie – the new head cook, better skilled than I can say the old one was – reassures Lilly, at age twenty the youngest of my husband’s maids. Lilly finishes sorting the long-sleeved off-white see-through maxi dress of embroidered tulle and chiffon that has a plunging neckline and corset lacing at the back.

They understand I am a man underneath. But that doesn't stop all three of us appreciating the beautiful dresses and lingerie that Augustuv had bought for me. They had finally been delivered, and we had unpacked them to fully examine them.

I am now clad in that dress about which Augustuv had murmured to me in the shop, "*Much too daring to wear in public...but for an intimate evening at home with me…why not?"* Beneath it I am wearing white silk stockings which rise to my knees and are decorated with orange and purple fiery ribbons shaped into roses, while clips attach them to purely sinful white lace thongs – you can almost see through them.

"Mrs. Guthrie, do you know where my darling husband is?" I ask her, seeing how tired and sleepy she looks.

"Oh, in the study, no doubt, Mrs. Nimue. Would you like me to take you there?"

"No. You head off to bed, the both of you. I insist," I reply, smiling kindly. They curtsy and silently take their leave, while I take one last look at myself in the wardrobe mirror.

I still don't recognize myself. I feel…like a firebird trapped in a gilded cage that only Augustuv has the key to.

I hope one day the door will open and I will be able to fly away freely with my sweet Will.

Darling Anthony... if only the circle could be complete, with you alive and holding me in your arms once again. I would finally be able to consummate my love and desire for you.

It is the faint strains of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata that lead me to the doorway of Augustuv's private study, which is upstairs in the converted attic space. He is sitting behind the wooden desk with a desk lamp illuminating his work space.

A fire gently crackles in the hearth of the ornate, white speckled marble fireplace. He is calmly reading a book, "*Evening in Paradise"* by Lucia Berlin, allowing the music to fill the room. He looks peaceful and calm, with no sign of his violent other self that he (usually) keeps well hidden. I rap my knuckles on the door, even though we both know he is aware of my presence.

"*Come in, Nimue my sweet. Stop lingering out in the corridor and join me,*" he says quietly. I calmly step inside and close the door silently behind me, then step into the very heart of his private sanctum.

He pauses in his reading, lifting his gaze upwards to look at me appraisingly. He bookmarks the chapter he was reading, then places the book down, rises and walks around his desk.

Augustuv takes my hands and spreads my arms out wide, admiring one of his more intimate purchases for me. He licks his lips when he notices the lingerie I am wearing beneath it.

"You… sinful, delightful and beautiful…wife of mine," Augustuv purrs, his voice becoming husky. He slowly takes hold of me and pulls me close to him.

Slowly and gently in time to the music, we begin to dance. I find myself resting the side of my cheek on his chest, listening to his heart beat – a steady, calm rhythm. Taking a deep

breath, I begin to speak.

“I had a sister – *Mischa,*” I start off, feeling my throat tighten with emotion, and yet I force myself to continue even if my voice breaks. “She could never pronounce my name, so always said *'Hannebae.'* Her favorite color was aubergine. It…is difficult to talk about her…even now.”

“Nimue, darling. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” he replies softly. I consider it, but I decide to tell him more, not omitting any details of the painful memories.

“After our parents were killed, Mischa and I were left to fend for ourselves. We survived on what we could, until I stumbled upon what had been your father’s estate lands at the time. I was weakened by near-starvation and needing help, as Mischa was so ill and I worried for her health and safety.”

“I saw you. I remember the day vividly. It was the first time I saw your beautiful, sorrowful face, concerned so for the safety of your little sister. What happened next?” he asks gently. The doors of the oubliettes which hold back the violent, dreadful memories slam wide open, and I am forcibly pulled down into the abyss.

“Please……please? My sister……she’s dying…Please, I need help.”

“Where is she?”

“Will…you…help me?”

“Yes… sweetheart, I’ll help you.”

Vladimir Grutas – liar, manipulator and vile human being – why did I ever believe he would help me? I must have been so weak with starvation that I thought he was a good person, until he suddenly set his eyes on my little sister – Mischa – and I saw in them greed and lust.

I had begged him not to harm her. I would do anything to make sure she survived. I remember how he had pulled me close to him – a sixteen-year-old child – and then lead me toward the stables, where he forced me to lie down among the hay. Mischa had already been taken to the house so she could eat, rest and try to get better.

His sweaty hands practically tore off my clothes, and soon he was over me and pressing his hips into mine. I had fisted my hands into the hay with a horrified gasp. He started to move, and he was hurting me, even though he wore protection, fearing if he left any trace of his violation in me he would be discovered.

I squeezed my eyes shut and repeated a mantra in my head: “I’m… doing this for Mischa… I’m doing this for Mischa,” as he jolted my body up and down. Sweet, innocent Mischa, sleeping soundly in the estate house, had no inkling of what her big brother was enduring to protect her.

He left me lying there, like I was a prostitute from the streets or one of the seedy back-alleyway brothels in Venice or Florence. That was the start of our contract.

Days passed and Mischa's health improved with the care she was being given, while I kept my side of the contract between myself and Grutas – allowing him to take me whenever he wished.

Until one day it all came crashing down. My poor, sweet, darling Mischa returned to the house after a day out with Vladimir Grutas' wife - Corina-Oventina Coquille – who came upstairs to check on her husband, leaving my little sister downstairs with Augustuv – a young boy of nineteen years.

She discovered a sight which would haunt her for the rest of her life: Myself being taken from behind by her husband as he pounded into me on what was effectively their marriage bed. When I lifted my face to see who was at the bedchamber door I saw her pale countenance, eyes widened in shock and horror, her hand flying up to cover her mouth so her terrified gasp couldn't escape. But I heard it all the same.

Through the half-open gap of the door, I had seen her start to shake her head from side to side, attempting to somehow deny what she was seeing. She believed her husband didn't love her at all and instead had developed an attraction to me.

Grutas never noticed it. He didn't even hear her stumbling down the stairs to take Mischa quickly out of the house. Soon Augustuv came up the stairs, pausing slightly at the doorway just as his father finished with me.

I had seen his gaze that day. The fiery jealousy of an Inner Serpent, wanting to be in his father's place and to be the one to claim me so thoroughly.

To have me underneath him.

* * * * * *

It was after I discovered Mischa had gone that I made my decision to get rid of Vladimir Grutas. I had found, to my horror, shock and anguish, that in her mad-stricken grief at what she had seen transpire between myself and her husband, Mrs. Corina-Oventina Coquille had taken Mischa to the large well in the maze and flung her into it, just as I tried in vain to reach my little sister through that same maze.

I had lunged at the woman, only for her grief-stricken strength to overwhelm me, allowing her to hit me over the head with a nearby plank. She then forced me into the well to join my sister.

* * * * * *

I held Mischa desperately in my arms so she wouldn't drown. Above us lightning flashed through thick, swirling grey storm clouds, then a deluge of rain started to fall. Indicating to her that we had to try to climb out, I remember how she gripped me tightly with her cold hands. Suddenly a stone, loosened by the moisture of the rainwater, slipped out of its place in the well wall, and Mischa began to fall.

I remember screaming her name, taking a deep breath and diving into the water, right down to the very bottom of the well, where I reached her just before she touched the silt-covered bottom.

* * * * * *

How we got out of that well, I cannot remember at all. All I remember is laying her body down on the hay in the barn after escaping that godforsaken maze. With a trembling hand I wiped the damp strands of her hay-colored hair from her face.

She was dead.

The wailing that came out of my throat was said later by the servants to be the most bloodcurdling sound they had ever heard in their lives.

* * * * * *

The day I would murder Vladimir Grutas came with a hitch. He introduced me to a group of friends, who were sitting in the kitchen as the cook served soup with mutton.

I wondered where the mutton had come from as there was no meat in the larder, and animals in the forest were scarce due to the fighting that had ravaged the land and claimed the lives of my parents.

Afterwards, I lied to Grutas about allowing his group of friends to have some "play time" with me, as he had called it. I instead had slaughtered them all in silent, efficient ways, while the servants who hated Grutas helped me dispose of the bodies.

I led Grutas away to an empty field, more concerned about how to murder him than about young Augustuv, who had seen me taking his father away.

I killed Vladimir Grutas by tying him to a split tree, the rope attached to a horse's saddle. I calmly whistled for the trained horse to start moving.

The ropes slowly tightened around his vile body like a boa constrictor around its prey – until finally a geyser of blood shot upwards into the air like a fountain.

Because he had forced me to eat Mischa, I ate him.

Nothing made me. I made myself.

Augustuv seems so affected by what I have told him about his father that I find myself kissing him shakily as tears run down my cheeks. He calmly lays me down on the sheepskin rug close to the study's fireplace.

His hands gently slide off the daring see-through gown and unlace the corset, leaving me in the white silk stockings and the white-lace thongs.

“Oh, my love…my sweet darling Nimue… If I had known…if only I had known then," he whispers, caressing my face. I slip one hand down to untie his silk kimono tie and spread the kimono open slightly, seeing he is wearing nothing underneath.

“Make...love to me. I want you, Augustuv. Please?” I ask him, needing something to ground me. After allowing the memories of losing Mischa and killing my husband’s father to rush out of the oubliette I had placed them in, its doors are now firmly closed again.

Part of me will probably always remain so fond of Augustuv, even when I leave him behind to at last join…*Will, my beloved Will...* because I see the vulnerability he hides from others around him. I sigh as my husband makes love to me gently. Each of his thrusts reaches deep within me.

I hold onto him, one hand cradling the back of his head and the other his shoulder as I writhe softly beneath him. The room fills with the breathless moans, pants and gasps of the pleasure that flares through my body – allowing him to overwhelm me each time he slips his cock in and out of me.

Even though I don’t truly love him, how could I deny him, when it was I who brought out this tender, more loving side of himself? I hope that when I leave him for Will, he will find someone new to love and not use his violence against.

A particularly hard thrust sends a burst of ecstasy sizzling up my spine. I find myself dragging the nails of the hand holding his shoulder down his skin, damp with sweat, drawing lines of blood as he groans heavily. He rolls us over, causing me to place both my hands on his chest for stabilization.

“*Ride me,”* he says in a husky purr. I slowly and gently lift my hips up, then back down until I’m riding him in a slow, sensuous way. At last my body tenses and trembles at the same time his does underneath me.

I don’t love you.

I can’t love you…Augustuv.

But…I’m thinking of something that may well break you, after it is done.

Thy Love is Better Than Wine

Chapter by TheWitchofStJohns

Chapter Summary

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.

- Song of Solomon 1:2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

THE LAUGHING MUSE HOTEL

FRIDAY EVENING

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

"*You…will meet them again. At a place where many great artworks hang in a strange city surrounded by water and boats of all shapes and sizes. Be…wary though…the Coiling Serpent will be lurking in the shadows. Stay where a hotel bears the Mask of Amusement when you reach the place where Nimue and Pearl-Lace are.*"

Weary after the trip from Florence to Venice via Francis and Reba's sailboat "*Monto de Cristo,*" accompanied by Lucien and Markus – who I could have left with Chiyoh, but I was reluctant to be separated from them again – I calmly take up a pen to write my name into the hotel registry. I was glad the hotel allowed their guests to keep their pets in their rooms with them, as long as they were kept under control and no incidents occurred.

Scrolling down to find a place to put my name, I go still when I see three names. Two of them pique my interest. One is undoubtedly related to Nimue, and the other is Will – *Pearl-Lace.* Finding there is space below, I sign my name – *Anthony Dimmond.*

After the three of us have had something to eat, Lucien and Markus are so tired that I must carry both of them in my arms to the sleeping quarters adjoined to my hotel room, then help them into the large bed – one that was obviously for a couple rather than than little boys –

where they both settle down as Pepilo joins them, trying to clamber onto the bed as I sigh softly.

I pick him up and place him down on the end of the bed on top of a large blanket, so he doesn't leave dog hair everywhere. The last thing I need is a cleaning bill from the hotel if they ever found out I had let him sleep on their pristine bed covers. When he is settled, I head back around the bed to tuck in Lucien and Markus.

Kissing both their foreheads, I hear Markus murmur sleepily, "*Night, Papa."* I smile and leave the bedroom, silently sliding closed the double doors that lead to my sleeping quarters. Unbuttoning my blue shirt slightly, I decide to pour myself a wee tipple of scotch whisky before I go to bed.

I open the door to the balcony and step out into the cool, refreshing air with my drink. I rest my elbows on the balustrade, seeing the lights of the nighttime gondolas floating through the water down below. Some old, drunken Venetian grandpas stumble down the path across from the water, singing "*Figaro…Figaro*" at the top of their lungs. I'm surprised they don't fall into the canal. I hear a match being struck, followed by a plume of smoke drifting into the air. I remember that next door is a private residence house that used to be part of the hotel.

Jean-Luc Le Chiffre Lecter – no doubt Hannibal's brother – owns it, signing into the hotel register as he does every time he visits Venice. Turning my gaze to the figure on the balcony, I see a strange, large man with harsh, grizzled features and a black eye patch over his left eye. Yet despite his foreboding appearance, he exudes a deep sense of calm as he smokes his cigarette.

He notices me as I raise my glass to him in a friendly greeting. He comes closer to the balcony on his side and leans against the wall.

"Beautiful night, don't you think? Reminds me of these words: '*I looked up at the night sky there. Orion above the horizon and, near it, Jupiter. I wondered if you could see it, too. I wondered if our stars were the same.'* Because, strangely enough, if you look you can see them now," I say quietly, taking a sip of whisky. He looks up to where I point with one finger and chuckles.

"Are you sure you're not some kind of astrologer in disguise?" he asks jokingly. I shake my head as I tilt my head back slightly, feeling quite relaxed. For once, I know I will sleep well tonight.

"No. Poet…of a sort, and sketcher. Though I haven't written poetry for a long time, not… since…well…since meeting two men with whom I fell in love," I reply, feeling a light blush rising on my cheeks when he winks at me with his remaining eye. Just then I hear someone calling him.

"Duncan…who are you talking to?"

Hearing his voice, which sounds so like Hannibal's, makes my chest ache for ***Nimue*.** The man, Le Chiffre, appears at the open doorway of the balcony to peer out, and I see his face –

so like his brother's, with the main difference being an apparently blind left eye, with a scar above and below it.

"Just a poet at heart. Pleasure meeting you…" the grizzled man begins to say, reaching over through the gap between the balconies to shake my hand, only to remember he never asked my name.

"Dimmond…. Anthony Dimmond," I tell him, while he tells me his name is Duncan Vizla. He turns to head inside, after putting out his cigarette and kissing his lover gently on the lips. Le Chiffre kisses him back softly.

"Go on. Don't worry. I'll be coming to bed soon," I hear the not-Hannibal whisper. Duncan nods in reply and goes inside, leaving me alone to face what I hope will be a pleasant exchange.

"Did you say Dimmond?" he asks. I knock back the remainder of the whisky and walk to the side of the balcony, while he steps closer to the side across from me.

"Yes. I guess you're wondering…how…I'm here…alive. Even I wonder how I survived the frigid waters which carried me to Iceland after I was stabbed by my half-brother – Augustuv," I reply, pulling my shirt open to reveal the scar so close to my heart.

He turns his face away, not wanting to look at the damage that he knows was caused by his ex-husband – Francis had told me that Le Chiffre had once been married to my half-brother. Almost unconsciously, I wrap one arm around myself and wish I could hold Nimue and Pearl-Lace again in my arms.

"Sheer will and determination to survive. You didn't want to die, and so fate allowed you to live," he muses. He tilts his head to one side when he sees I'm trying to hide from him the tears that burn in my eyes. They begin to spill as small whimpers escape me.

"Dimmond, do you wish to see Pearl-Lace?"

Bringing a hand up to wipe the tears away, I wonder if I have heard him correctly. My eyes widen and I look at him desperately. *"Yes, more than anything -"* I begin to say, my voice breaking.

He steps to one side, revealing - ***Will!!*** - standing there behind him – pale, trembling, eyes and mouth open in shock, and hands reaching out to embrace me. I am just as astounded as he is.

Suddenly, with a frantic whimper, Will clambers up on the balustrade and *leaps* across to the balcony of my hotel room. I catch him in my arms and lower him gently down onto the balcony floor.

Our arms wrap around each other tightly. I bury my face into the crook of his neck, and he does the same with me, both of us sobbing with joy. I inhale deeply his favorite perfume – *Peach Blossom Sin* – then pull back to cup both his cheeks, smiling softly as I rest my forehead against his.

"*Never will I lose you both again. I swear it by my own aching heart,"* I whisper. Speechless, Will smiles up at me through his tears. I help him up and lead him to the balcony door. I look back one last time at Le Chiffre, trying and I'm sure failing to express my gratitude to him without words. He softly smiles before he turns and disappears into his room, shutting the balcony door behind him.

"Haaa… Anthony… Don't stop…. Don't stop…"

"I…won't……I won't, Will..."

Keeping quiet in our lovemaking is quite a feat and yet, we manage to achieve it as I slowly and gently lift him up and down, feeling myself slipping in and out of his tight, warm, well-lubricated entrance as I hold him in my lap.

We are holding each other tight, completely covered in sweat that runs down our bodies like droplets of rain. We both wish deep down that Nimue was with us – feeling, experiencing and enjoying this moment like we are right now, together after so long.

"I'm… close….Pearl-Lace, my love…I'm…close …" I grunt out, increasing my thrusts as I feel my release coming nearer and nearer. Will pulls me into a breathless kiss filled with fervent passion as I hold him even closer to me.

Afraid if I let go, I will lose him again.

The pressure building within us soon reaches an all-consuming climax, like a water lily opening its petals to reveal what lies within. Then gentle peacefulness overtakes us as we contentedly fall back into the mound of pillows.

Our breathing slows, heart rates resume their normal rhythm, and our orgasms subside, leaving us both lying there wishing Nimue was here, reunited with the ones who love and cherish everything about them.

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

COQILLE'S PRIVATE RESIDENCE

SATURDAY EVENING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Nimue... come on, my darling… We'll be late if you don't hurry."

Augustuv calls to me impatiently from downstairs in the foyer. I adjust my golden earrings - entwined snakes biting each other's tails - one last time in the wardrobe mirror. I smooth

down one of the many dresses he bought for me – the long-sleeved draped midi in fluorescent blue viscose, with an asymmetrical neckline and a split up the side that comes up nearly to my hip bone. I stiffen slightly when sudden hands touch my hips, only to relax against my husband as he smiles softly.

“I'm almost ready, dearest. I just need to get my earrings sorted and my lipstick on,” I say. He reaches over to the makeup table to choose among the shades of lipstick. He decides on one called “*Bleu Nightingale”.* He prompts me to turn to him, then gently applies it to my lips for me.

“Of course, my darling," he purrs. "You are definitely going to make so many women utterly envious of your looks tonight, and so many men jealous of *me*, I think, when they see my beautiful and seductive wife on my arm.” He finishes up, tilting his head to admire his handiwork with a smile. I blot my lips with a tissue and return his smile.

We are both now ready to go. I allow him to slip me into my most favorite of the coats he has purchased for me, the warm sandy gold coat with the fake fur-fleeced lining. Leaving our shared bedchamber, we walk down the corridor and down the flight of stairs. To my delight, the entire Coquille staff have come to see us off.

Walking over to them, I open my coat to show off my dress. Lilly squeals softly in delight, and Mrs. Guthrie winks when I coquettishly show her and Lilly what I have on beneath the dress – black lace thongs and stockings with sandy gold roses on them, with white ribbons trailing down. I place my fingers to my lips as a sign for them not to mention it to my husband, and wink back.

They mime zipping their lips shut while Mr. Rasiu-Velecchio rolls his eyes, despite the broad smile on his face that betrays him. They compose themselves as Augustuv, who has just finished placing some letters on the tray near the front door to be posted tomorrow, walks back over to me, holding out his arm with a jaunty grin.

“*Shall we, Mrs. Coquille?”*

“*I don’t see why not, Mr. Coquille.”*

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA DI VENEZIA – THE AMBER BALLROOM GALLERY SHOWING

SATURDAY EVENING

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

I'm not sure how I had gotten an invitation from Signora De Laurentiis for this gallery showing. I imagine Will had a hand in it somehow, or perhaps Le Chiffre, seeing as how the man himself is here tonight – it seems to face his ex-husband. I had asked him to ensure the meeting did not devolve to physical altercations between them; Coquille is still my brother, even though we share different mothers. Le Chiffre assured me it would be a verbal exchange, nothing more.

Among the crowd I spot Svetlana, ostensibly Le Chiffre's adopted daughter. The way they are with each other when they think I'm not paying attention, however, gives me doubts. I catch her eye and she smiles, walks over to me and squeezes my arm. She is looking at me with concern on her fine face – so like Nimue's. I pat her hand and smile, saying without words: "*I'm fine. Don't worry…. I've coped with bigger crowds than this before."*

Seeing she is reassured by this, we step into what is affectionately known as the Amber Ballroom. At the very end of the long room with large, ornate curved windows is the stage where the "*Surprise,*" as Will called it (but refused to say any more about it) would be introduced by Signora De Laurentiis.

There is a long white cloth-covered table laden with a large, generous spread of beautifully crafted food. I hear whispers among the guests: "*Signore Coquille's wife helped make all this food. It is said she is an amazing cook. Doesn't it all look delicious?"* and "*Oh, look…. there they are!"* I take a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and turn in the direction everyone seems to be looking.

And there is ***Nimue!!*** - beautiful as ever in a shocking blue gown, dancing quietly with Augustuv to the strains of a waltz from a string quartet. Other guests start to crowd the floor and join in the dancing.

Everything else fades away in my mind and heart. There is only *Nimue*. I stare at them for who knows how long, drinking them in like a man dying of thirst in the desert.

How will they react when they see that I am not dead?

And then Nimue raises their eyes and looks straight at me over Coquille's shoulder. I am standing next to an ice sculpture of a swan gracefully spreading its wings outward, its neck tilted back. Their eyes go wide and their face turns pale, and they stumble in their dance for just a moment. Quickly Nimue manages to compose themselves, saying something to Augustuv before he turns to see what had startled them.

This is the moment. I turn and step out of the glass doors leading to a large balcony, with stone steps winding down to a secluded garden area. I breathe in the cool night air, and I wait. Finally one of the doors next to me slowly opens, revealing Nimue still shaken by the unexpected sight of me.

"*An……Anthony!!!?.... How!!!?.....I saw Augustuv murder you before my eyes!!"*

Holding my arms out wide, I feel Nimue melt into them. We hold each other wordlessly for a moment, both of us trembling. I draw back slightly and take their beautiful face between my

hands, pulling them in for a kiss. Nimue whimpers softly and begins to kiss back, moving their lips against mine as I tenderly sift one hand through their soft, silky hair.

It is Nimue who reluctantly breaks our kiss, a strand of glistening saliva connecting our swollen lips. They rest their forehead against mine, deeply inhaling my musky scent and the traces of *Peach Blossom Sin* that remain from my night with... *"Will,"* Nimue whispers, smiling softly when I nod, tears glistening in those beautiful, hauntingly maroon eyes.

"I had better go back inside. Augustuv has gone to get me a drink from the bar downstairs, but he might return unexpectedly and come looking when he finds I'm not where he left me. *I love you*," Nimue whispers. I allow them to slip out of my grasp and go back inside. I will my heart to stop thudding against my rib cage, waiting a few minutes before I head back myself into the Amber Ballroom.

GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA DI VENEZIA – THE AMBER BALLROOM GALLERY SHOWING

EARLIER THAT EVENING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Nimue, Signore Coquille. Welcome!"

Signora De Laurentiis, resplendent in a shimmering gold satin cocktail dress, glides down the stairs and across the foyer of the Gallerie Dell'Academia as we arrive and greets us warmly. After a brief moment of small talk, she turns to me with an apologetic look.

"Nimue, I'm glad you two have arrived a bit early. I hate to ask you this, but it seems that we are a bit short on the food we had hoped to serve tonight. The chef I hired was woefully unprepared for the task, and he has stormed out in a huff. I was wondering..." She hesitates, then plunges forward. "I have heard so much about your culinary skills. Might I prevail upon you to help us out in the kitchen, just a bit? We have ingredients for canapes, amuse-bouche, that sort of thing. We have at least an hour before the guests begin to arrive, and honestly the preparations shouldn't take you too long. Do you think...?" She raises her eyebrows in hopeful anticipation.

Augustuv and I exchange a look, and he shrugs as if to say, "It's up to you, darling!" It's been so long since I've been able to cook, and although this is quite unexpected, I jump at this rare opportunity. "Of course, signora, I'd be more than happy to," I reply with a warm smile.

The signora claps her hands together and raises her eyes heavenward. "Oh! Thank you so much, my dear. Signore Coquille, the bar is downstairs if you'd like to wait for your wife there." She takes my arm and leads me excitedly to the kitchen. "Of course, we will have an apron for you, and the staff will assist you, naturally, and..."

What a joy to be back in a kitchen again! Not even our lavishly furnished kitchen at home can compare to this one. It's like a dream come true. Greeting the small, flustered and overworked kitchen staff, I hang up my coat, tie on the apron and get to work. Of course, my *preferred ingredient* will not be available this time (I have not eaten human flesh since that hired thug back in Florence), but one makes do with what one has on hand.

The knives fly, the pots boil, the skillets sizzle, and soon the preparation area is laden with some of my favorite amuse-bouche - veal heart tartare tarts, foie gras timbits, fresh oysters with mignonette sauce (sadly, no pearls), escargot bourguignonne, crostini di fegatini, pumpkin gruyere gougères, and a zakouski caviar platter with blini. I stand back and regard our work (I couldn't have done all of this without the staff's grateful help) with an immense satisfaction that I have not felt in a very long time. I look forward to preparing sumptuous meals once again when I am finally reunited with Will, Anthony and Abigail.

The staff and I bring out the plates and arrange them on the serving table in the ballroom, just as the first guests begin to arrive. Signora De Laurentiis is overjoyed and can't stop sampling and commenting on all the delicious dishes, and thanking me over and over again for agreeing to assist her in her time of crisis. Augustuv, having had several cocktails at the bar, embraces me with wandering hands and whispers how proud he is of me. I am secretly thankful for his continued jovial mood, and pray that this evening goes smoothly.

A string quartet plays a lovely, wistful waltz as Augustuv whirls me about the room. It was my understanding that this was to be a small, low-key affair, but trust Signora De Laurentiis to pull out all the stops. Chandeliers are glowing softly, bathing the ballroom in a low warm light. The scent of roses fills the air. There is even a rather ostentatious ice sculpture of a swan near the amuse-bouche table, at which I cannot help but smile. After two or three turns around the floor, I notice there is a young man standing near it, looking my way. I plan to throw him a coquettish glance, just for amusement's sake. But as we come nearer and I get a clearer view of him....

I forget how to breathe for a moment, and my heart nearly stops. It can't be, he's dead... It cannot be him... But it is.

ANTHONY!!!

I become lightheaded and stumble in my husband's embrace. "Darling? Are you all right?" he inquires with concern.

"Oh... oh dearest, I... it's just that I've been standing so long in these high heels, and my feet are simply killing me. I'm feeling a bit lightheaded as well. I think I had better go and sit down for a moment," I manage to say, my breath coming in slight gasps. "Would you be a dear and fetch me a glass of wine, please? I'll feel better once I have a little rest. And get these damn shoes off," I add with a pained chuckle.

"Of course, darling," he replies as he guides me to a nearby chair. "Chateauneuf du Pape, yes? I'll just be a moment, my sweet." He kisses my cheek with a fond smile and departs.

As soon as he is out of sight I glance quickly over to the ice sculpture, but Anthony is gone. Looking frantically about the room, I see him disappearing through the doors to the balcony. I try to look casual as I stand, smooth down my dress, and walk (not too quickly) over to the doors. I stand there for a moment, taking deep breaths and trying to remain calm. It is a struggle.

At last I open the doors and step out onto the balcony. He is standing there, waiting. It *is* him. It truly is my darling Anthony. Am I dreaming?

"An……Anthony!!!?.... How!!!?……I saw Augustuv murder you before my eyes!!"

With a look of immense love he opens his arms, and I rush into them. We just hold each other, both of us shaking. He takes my face into his hands and kisses me. It is the most indescribable feeling in the world. My Anthony has returned to me! We kiss and kiss and he strokes my hair with such tenderness. I am sorry to have to end it, but Augustuv could return at any moment. We rest our foreheads together, just gazing at each other, and I take a deep breath. I am almost overpowered by the beautiful scent of his body, and... something else. *Peach Blossom Sin.*

"Will," I whisper. He smiles and nods. Oh! It is too good to be true. My loves have found each other! I feel the tears coming and I must stop them. I can't afford to rejoin Augustuv looking like I've been weeping.

"I had better go back inside," I reluctantly whisper. "Augustuv has gone to get me a drink from the bar downstairs, but he might return unexpectedly and come looking when he finds I'm not where he left me. *I love you*," I add intensely. With a last look of love and longing between us, I turn and open the balcony doors, stepping back into the ballroom and walking quickly back to my chair. Just as I sit down and remember to remove my shoes, Augustuv appears with my glass of wine, looking slightly flustered.

"Here we are, darling," handing me the glass and looking down at me with love and care. "Feeling better now, I hope?"

I gratefully take several sips of wine, then look up at him with a genuine smile.

"Oh yes, my dearest. Much better. Better than I have in a very long time."

GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA DI VENEZIA – THE AMBER BALLROOM GALLERY SHOWING

THE RECREATION ROOM AND BAR

LE CHIFFRE'S P.O.V.

I am more than pleased to discover that the museum has retained its recreation room, with several gaming tables available. Not nearly as elaborate as any of my casinos, of course, but perfectly serviceable to indulge my whims.

Mischa and I approach a table occupied by several high rollers, and I inquire politely if I may join in. They agree, and we seat ourselves. I always enjoy playing with Mischa at my side; she is my good luck charm.

They are playing a hand of El Diablo, named for the legendary player who won millions all over the world, then abruptly and mysteriously disappeared. The game is going quite well. Much lower stakes than I am accustomed to, but it doesn't really matter. The feel of the cards and the clatter of the chips relax me, and that is all I am after at the moment.

I turn my head to Mischa. "Dearest, would you mind terribly fetching me a scotch and soda?" I ask, glancing over to the bar - and my blood freezes.

My ex-husband - Augustuv-Magnus Coquille, the man who caused me so much physical and emotional pain - is standing at the bar.

"Of course, not at all," she replies, rising and about to walk over - but she freezes as well. She looks down at me anxiously, hesitant to approach when she sees Coquille.

After a tense moment, I turn my gaze up to her. "It's all right, sweetheart. Go ahead," I say quietly, even as dread fills my heart.

She nods, still worried, and makes her way to the bar. I manage to divide my attention between the game and what is transpiring at the bar, but it is difficult. Coquille is startled to see Mischa. They exchange a few unheard words, and then he glances over and sees me. Our eyes lock, and he appears to go a bit pale.

I turn back to the game and do my best to appear unruffled. When I glance back up, the bartender is handing him a glass of wine. He lays down some money with a trembling hand and with a final glance at me, he turns and hurriedly departs.

So, he *is* here. And no doubt with Hannibal. Thoughts begin to churn in my mind, and my distraction costs me a hand. Mischa returns with my drink and sits back down beside me.

"What did he say?" I murmur.

"Nothing, really. He was very surprised to see me. I mentioned you were here playing poker, and I guess he looked over and saw you. He seemed very flustered and left quickly," Mischa whispers.

I nod slowly and return to the game. I had promised Anthony that I would not make a scene if I saw Coquille. But now that I have seen him, my thoughts are jumbled and I am honestly not sure what I am going to do. We shall just have to see how the evening progresses.

GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA DI VENEZIA – THE AMBER BALLROOM GALLERY SHOWING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Signore e signori, mesdames et messieurs, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Amber Ballroom and our gallery showing!"

Signora De Laurentiis stands on the stage before ten display easels, each draped with a cloth, at last announcing the opening of the gallery showing. All of the guests, including ourselves, gaze at her in rapt attention. I am truly looking forward to seeing these works.

"Thank you all so very much for coming tonight. I am beyond pleased to introduce these works to you. An anonymous donor has gifted us with ten remarkable original charcoal sketches, most of them scenes of Florence. The artist is, frankly, unknown to us, but he most definitely deserves to have his works appreciated and enjoyed by a wider audience. He is not *completely* unknown, however; thankfully each work is signed," she adds with a smile. "I have been told that art is not his primary occupation, and that he is in fact a psychiatrist from the United States."

My heart, which began thumping at the mention of Florence, leaps into my throat. Oh, it couldn't possibly be. I know that I left many of my works with Will on the boat in Greece, but... No. It's not possible, I reassure myself.

"When you see these works, however, I think you will agree with me that this doctor's *hobby* is quite remarkable," the signora continues.

"So, without further ado, may I present the works of... *Doctor Hannibal Lecter.*"

I cannot help but gasp and glance over at my husband. He is very startled, but when his gaze fixes on mine, it is suspicious and cold.

The signora's assistants carefully remove the cloth coverings over each easel with a dramatic flourish. And I find myself staring at ten of my own sketches. The Duomo, the Ponte Vecchio, the Bardini Gardens, and more.

I am astounded. I am not sure whether I should be angry with Will for giving my precious sketches away, or honored that they have found a home in such a prestigious museum. But I can no longer be truly angry with my beloved Will.

The guests have begun to occupy the stage and are eagerly perusing my work. The low rumble of voices soon fills the ballroom, with the occasional exclamation of "*Straordinario!*" and "*Così bello!*" rising above the din. To say that I am not secretly pleased would be a baldfaced lie, but I struggle to keep the emotion from my face.

I glance over again at Augustuv. "Well - shall we?" I say quietly. He nods, still appearing on the verge of anger but also attempting to appear neutral. I take his arm and we walk to the stage.

This has been, to say the least, a most unexpected evening. What else does the night have in store for me?

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to Janice Poon, *Hannibal*'s awesome food stylist, and her amazing book *Feeding Hannibal: A Connoisseur's Cookbook* for providing suggestions for Nimue's amuse-bouche!

Dearly Beloved and Longed For

Chapter by TheWitchofStJohns

Chapter Summary

> Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved.
>
> - Philippians 4:1

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA DI VENEZIA – THE AMBER BALLROOM GALLERY SHOWING

SATURDAY EVENING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Seeing my old sketches on display here in the Amber Ballroom brings back so many memories of Florence. It is hard for me to control my emotions, but somehow I manage. Augustuv, it seems, is deeply affected by the sight of my artwork. He is keeping me close to him with such a tight grip on my waist I can feel his nails digging into my flesh through the dress. I pray that he notices I'm wincing; I can feel a slight trickle of blood running down the side of my hip. We are just approaching the last sketch when a young man, looking slightly out of place with the no-doubt borrowed suit he is wearing, comes over to us, looking pointedly at my husband. Augustuv shoots a startled glance his way and releases his death grip on my waist. I sigh gratefully and and do my best to rearrange myself as they lean slightly toward one another. A few murmured words are exchanged between them, then the young man nods curtly and steps aside, his hands folded in front of him, quietly waiting. Augustuv clears his throat and turns to me with a tight smile on his face, wrapping his arm around my waist once again.

"Excuse me, my darling Nimue. But...it seems I am called away. I... may have to leave the city tomorrow for several days. Wait here for me, will you?" he says, tightening his grip so much I give a hitched gasp and weakly nod. He kisses my cheek and slips away with the mysterious young man; they soon disappear into the crowd of chattering patrons.

Breathing slowly in and out to calm myself, I decide I need some fresh air. The packed ballroom has become stifling and airless, and I was not going to simply wait around as Augustuv had suggested. I make my way to the double doors which open onto the balcony, stone steps leading down to the garden with a copy of Neptune's fountain in the center of it. Silently passing my sketch of *Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus*, I step through the doors - and my heart skips a beat.

Will is standing at the bottom of the stone steps, waiting for me with Anthony, who has his hands in his pockets - gentle smiles on both their beautiful faces.

I suppress the urge to simply *run* down the steps and into their arms. Instead I slowly walk down with a modicum of dignity, but with a wide smile of joy spreading across my face. At last I reach the bottom, and Anthony holds out his arm for me to take. Slipping my hand through it, I hold my free hand out to Will, who kisses it sweetly and grasps it in his own.

WILL'S P.O.V.

The three of us walk quietly down the path, as fireflies appear and begin their nighttime dancing ritual. I bring Hannibal's hand up to again kiss his knuckles lightly. I can see his maroon eyes twinkling with delight as Anthony nuzzles his nose into Hannibal's neck, inhaling his perfume - "*Ochre Orchid*." We come to a sitting area near the fountain, where I see Svetlana is sitting feeding the swans - some are black with crimson beaks, and among them are also two white swans. Le Chiffre is there as well, standing close by Svetlana with his back turned so Hannibal cannot see his twin brother's face. We seat ourselves on the stone bench, Hannibal between Anthony and I.

"Are you cold...both of you?" Anthony asks us. I turn fully to face both him and Hannibal. I am so happy to be reunited with my two loves that I can't resist kissing Hannibal's lips, as Anthony at the same time starts to kiss his neck, trailing his lips softly up and down. Both of us place a hand on Hannibal's thighs,then slowly slide them under his beautiful blue dress.

"*Haaaaa....My darlings.....Anthony!!!....Pearl-Lace!!!...*" he whispers breathlessly through our kisses as we both cup him through his lace thongs, feeling how wet he has already become. He softly releases his lips from mine to look down at where our hands are, smiling happily.

"If we had the time...I would want you both, right now," Anthony whispers, slipping his hand out from under Hannibal's dress and resting it on his chest - which rises slowly and gently under it.

"Tomorrow...both of you, please, come to my home. I will text you the address. Augustuv will be away all day for business and...we will have all the time we need to consummate our reunion," Hannibal tells us. I surge forward to kiss him again, and it soon becomes a three-way kiss as we clasp each other's hands tightly.

LE CHIFFRE'S P.O.V.

It pleases me so to see Hannibal reunited with his loved ones as they walk down the path towards us. I am quick to turn my back before they pass us, however. I am sure I am ready to introduce myself and Mischa to my long-lost twin, but now is not the moment.

But Mischa has seen them, and her eyes widen as they pass. I sit beside her on the edge of the fountain, and her gaze turns to me.

"That's... that's Hannibal, isn't it?" she whispers. I can see her eyes begin to glisten with tears.

"Yes, sweetheart, it is. I think the time has come to get him back into our lives. What do you think?" I reply, tossing some more bread to the swans and smiling gently at her.

One tear slides down her cheek. "Oh yes. More than anything. I'm scared, though," she adds, looking down at her hands.

I withdraw a handkerchief from my pocket and gently dab her eyes, then my own as a small drop of blood has begun to ooze from it. "Why, darling? He will be so glad to see you. He thought you were dead. He thought... well, many awful things about your disappearance," I say.

"I know, but... what if he's angry with me?" she whispers, sniffling. I move closer to her and put my arm around her shoulders, squeezing her comfortingly.

"That's impossible, my dove. You were only a child then. He could never hold that against you." She smiles up at me, still sniffling. "Are you all right now?" She nods. I stand up and take both her hands.

"Then let's go meet our brother, shall we?"

I first stealthily check to make sure we aren't interrupting anything. Hannibal, Anthony and Will are seated on the stone bench near the fountain, quietly resting in one another's company. Will's head is on Hannibal's shoulder, and Anthony rests his head against Hannibal's. Their eyes are closed and they are smiling.

Seeing that the time is right, I creep back to Mischa, take her hand and slowly lead her over to the bench. We stand there for a moment, quietly observing. I look down at Mischa and see

that her eyes are fixed on Hannibal. She is trembling. I squeeze her hand in reassurance, then after a moment I softly speak his name.

"Hannibal?"

The three of them open their eyes and look up. Anthony and Will continue to smile, but Hannibal looks startled.

"Yes? Who are you?" he inquires, a bit suspiciously.

"You don't know me, but... well, perhaps in some way you do," I begin. He stares at me, and Anthony and Will take his hands.

"We've never met, but we should have, a very long time ago," I continue. "When we were born, the troubles in our land were just beginning, and our parents feared for our safety. So they sent me to live with a cousin of our mother's in Albania. I was a mere three months old. When I was older, my adopted parents told me the sad story of what had happened to our family. I deeply regret being separated from you, and I have decided that separation must end now."

As I speak, Hannibal is slowly rising from the bench, stunned comprehension dawning on his face. He takes several halting steps forward until we are face to face.

"Hannibal, I am Jean-Luc Le Chiffre Lecter. Your twin brother." I shake my head slightly and begin to smile. "I've missed you so."

He continues to stare at me in stunned silence. Then his hands rise and land on my shoulders.

"I... I don't know how, but... I've always known. I've always known."

Suddenly our arms are around one another, and we are holding each other tightly for the first time in our lives. It is almost overwhelming.

Will and Anthony are holding each other's hands and smiling through their tears. Hannibal and I continue to hold each other for many long and wonderful moments. Finally I reluctantly release him, placing my own hands on his shoulders.

"Hannibal. There is someone else here that I want you to meet."

I turn, glancing over my shoulder at Mischa, who has been standing several feet behind me, still looking shaken. I hold out my hand to her and she takes it, slowly coming forward but looking at the ground. When she comes level to me, she hesitantly raises her head and looks Hannibal fully in the eyes.

Hannibal gasps and clamps a hand over his mouth. Anthony and Will stand and come to his side at once, each grasping one of his arms. Hannibal begins to tremble, his widened eyes not leaving Mischa's face. Many years have passed, but he knows exactly who stands before him. He begins to shake his head vigorously in denial as his hand drops from his mouth.

"No...no...it can't be...it can't be..." he rasps, then in a broken voice he cries out:

"MISCHA!!!!!"

Mischa bursts into tears and runs forward, throwing her arms around Hannibal's waist and sobbing.

"Yes!! Yes it's me!! Oh Hannibal!! Hannibal I'm so sorry!!"

Hannibal wrenches his arms from the concerned grip of his lovers and throws them around Mischa. He is sobbing too.

"But how, Mischa, how?! You were dead, I watched you die!! And then I thought... I thought... that I had.... ***OH GOD, MISCHA, MY SWEET ANGEL, MY LITTLE SPARROW, YOU'RE ALIVE!!!"***

Suddenly Hannibal's knees buckle beneath him and he begins to fall as he loses consciousness. Anthony and Will catch him before he hits the ground, and they carry him back to the bench.

MISCHA'S P.O.V.

Hannibal has finally come around after fainting at the shock of seeing me alive after so many years believing I was dead. He still seems so shaken that regaining his composure is difficult. He gazes at me in wonder, touching my face and stroking my hair, as if to reassure himself that he is not hallucinating. As for me, I am still trembling and holding on to his free hand like I will never let it go. And I honestly don't want to.

"Mischa, please, tell me what happened to you, my angel," he asks softly as his lovers embrace him to keep him grounded. Will sits on his other side, and Anthony stands behind him with his arms draped around Hannibal's neck. Jean-Luc sits beside me, his arm round my shoulders and his other hand holding my free hand. He gives me an encouraging smile. Feeling safe and protected now, I take a deep breath and begin my story.

* * * * * *

I knew that something was deeply wrong when Augustuv's mother came storming down the stairs and over to me, grabbing my arm and dragging me out into the courtyard. As she yanked me toward the maze, her breath coming in wheezing pants, I knew that something horrible was about to happen. I bit the madwoman's hand and freed myself from her grasp as she howled in pain.

I ran back the way I came and she chased after me like a screaming banshee. I was so frightened and could not understand why she had suddenly turned on me with such brutal fury. I ran around the corner of the large house, not looking where I was going. Suddenly I tripped over a large rock and found myself colliding with someone. I lifted my head and saw

a mirror image of myself - the only difference being the eyes were violet. Augustuv's mother rounded the corner then. So turned by her mad grief, she seized the other girl instead of me. With widened violet eyes the girl understood, yet somehow accepted her fate and gestured to me to run - to get away from that accursed house as far and as fast as possible.

What happened after that comes only in small fragments - wandering alone in the forest, managing to survive somehow; returning to the house only to find it had been burnt to the ground. Only a skeleton husk of stonework remained. Several days later, when I was found by our mother's Albanian cousin - he had heard rumors and had searched for weeks for any sign of Hannibal and myself - I was curled up in the corner of what had once been the kitchen, exhausted, dirty and starving, holding a slightly singed teddy bear that had survived the fire.

He took me back to Albania, and for the first time I met Jean-Luc. When I first saw him I thought he was Hannibal! An unbreakable bond quickly formed between us. When he came of age and left home to seek his fortune, he took me with him, passing me off as his adopted daughter Svetlana. I was so happy to be with him, but... I couldn't stop thinking about Hannibal, and how I longed to see him again.

I still have the teddy bear.

* * * * * *

I close my eyes as my story ends and the harsh memory fades away. I feel Hannibal cradle the back of my head and rest his forehead against mine, whispering "It's all right now. You're here with...with the people who love you. You are no longer alone, Little Sparrow." Hearing him tenderly say his nickname for me when we were children overwhelms me. I bury my face into his chest, softly crying tears of joy, happiness and love. We are all together now, just like we should have been all these years.

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

COQUILLE'S PRIVATE RESIDENCE

THE NEXT DAY, LATE MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

The events of last night drift through my mind as I sit at our dining table with Will and Anthony, enjoying a delicious lunch and happy conversation. Reunion with my loves, my long-lost twin brother, and my darling Mischa - it all seems like a mirarculous dream. I am floating on a high no drug could possibly replicate.

Augustuv never returned to fetch me after he disappeared with the mysterious young man. He texted me later, saying he had been "unavoidably detained" and would be out of the city for the next several days. I couldn't tell him how happy I was to hear this, but I texted him back a bland reply, "have a nice time, let me know when you'll be home," etc. Jean-Luc and Mischa saw me home, and we made plans to get together the following weekend. I cannot wait to spend more time with them. We have so much catching up to do!

But right at this moment, there is something else that I cannot wait for. I had dismissed our house staff for the rest of the day. Will and I had decided to take it easy today, wearing our regular men's clothing. Both he and Anthony look - well, good enough to eat. (If you know me at all, you know that I cannot resist a good cannibal pun.) As our meal comes to an end, the three of us are casting sultry glances at one another and what I believe is called "playing footsie" under the table. The good food and wine are feeding the fire in our blood, and anticipation of what is coming runs high.

At last I rise. "Shall we take our wine into the study, darlings?" I say coquettishly. "We can take care of the dishes....later. *Much* later," I add, casting them a coy glance from beneath my lashes.

Will rises with a grin. "Hannibal Lecter leaving dirty dishes on the table? What is this world coming to?" he declares in mock consternation as Anthony laughs and kisses him on the cheek. Oh, these two. How I love them so.

We troupe into Augustuv's study with our wine glasses and seat ourselves on the blood-red leather chaise lounge. But the wine is quickly gulped down and forgotten as glasses roll onto the floor and our hands and mouths reach for one another in a hunger that cannot be sated with mere food and drink.

I am seated between them as Anthony pulls me into a passionate kiss, while Will kisses and nips at my neck. Our hands roam over each other's bodies eagerly as sighs and moans fill the air. Will kneels with one knee between my legs, leaning over to join us in a three-way kiss that sends shivers up my spine and blood rushing down into my quickly hardening cock.

Anthony's hand slides down my chest, unbuttoning my shirt a button or two before continuing down to caress my cock through my trousers. I lean my head back with a groan, lost in the sensation. Will and Anthony continue the kiss, their tongues entwining and licking into each other's mouths. The sight is too much. I pull Will roughly to me, kissing him deeply, biting his neck and cupping his own burgeoning erection through his jeans. Anthony continues to caress me as he digs the nails of his other hand into my shoulder and licks my exposed collarbones.

"Oh God!" Will gasps. "Hannibal... I want you in my mouth. As soon as possible," he moans. He leaps from the chaise and begins to pull off his clothes haphazardly. Anthony unbuttons my shirt the rest of the way, running his hands all over my chest, then undoes my belt and unceremoniously yanks my trousers and briefs down my legs and off, exposing my hard cock to the cool air.

Almost delirious with arousal, I watch as Will, now completely and gloriously nude, kneels on the floor between my legs and licks a long stripe up my cock, then gently pushes down the

foreskin and takes the already dripping head into his beautiful mouth. I am barely conscious of Anthony stripping out of his clothes as fast as he is able to manage.

Will takes me deeper into his warm velvet mouth as Anthony drops to the floor on his back and slides up between Will's legs. He reaches up and caresses Will's ass and thighs, making him moan and sending delicious reverberations through my cock and up into my chest. My poor heart is ready to burst with love and passion for these two men, my pearls, both of them the sweetest combination of angel and devil that could be imagined. My fingers run through Will's curls and press him closer to me as his mouth and tongue continue to do amazing things to my cock.

Suddenly Will lets out a loud moan which momentarily loosens his mouth's hold on me. I manage to raise my head from the back of the chaise and gaze downward. Anthony has taken Will's throbbing erection into his own mouth and is pleasuring him as Will is pleasuring me. With a gasp and a groan my head thuds back down and my eyes close. After the last few months of terror and virtual imprisonment, what is finally happening right now is almost too much for my overloaded senses to bear.

At last I come with loud cries and groans, filling Will's throat while he swallows down every drop. He too is moaning wantonly as Anthony continues to work his cock in and out of his mouth and throat from below, hanging on for dear life to the luscious globes of Will's beautiful ass.

Finally catching my breath, I gently push Will away and gesture for him to lift his hips up and away from Anthony's mouth. He protests weakly but does so. Anthony looks up from the floor, also making his displeasure known. I rise a bit unsteadily and motion toward the door.

"Bedroom - the guest bedroom down the hall. Now," I rasp.

WILL'S P.O.V.

Am I dreaming? Is this really happening at last?

I am lying on the silken sheets of the enormous bed in the guest room with the two loves of my life, limbs entangled, bodies softly undulating, moans and cries and gasps and whispers floating in the cool air of the room. Opaque blue curtains drawn over the windows let in a minimal amount of light, casting a shimmering glow over the room like moonlight over the ocean. Below us, the city of Venice goes about its daily business. But here, in this lovely room, we are cocooned in our own little world of love and sex and passion, a world of our own making.

Hannibal is spread out luxuriously on his back and Anthony is deep inside him, thrusting gently as I lie on my stomach behind him, laving and kissing and sucking at his softly contracting entrance. There is nothing I would not do for these two, my loves, my pearls. If only we could lie like this forever, loving each other.

Anthony leans down to capture Hannibal's lips in a breathless kiss, and his thrusting starts to gain momentum. The hardness of my cock pressing down into the mattress is driving me mad with pleasure. I raise myself to a kneeling position and fumble for the bottle of lube somewhere on the bed. I quickly slick up my aching cock and prepare to enter Anthony, but it is difficult to keep him relatively still while I do so. I begin to laugh at the delightful absurdity of the situation, and soon Anthony and Hannibal are laughing too. But the laughing quickly turns to moans on everyone's part as I finally slide deep into his body, relishing for just a moment the incredible feeling of the three of us conjoined at last. And then the passion and the lust and the love overtakes us, and we are nothing more than a sweaty writhing mass on those silken sheets, the cool light from the curtained windows washing over us as we sigh and groan and cry and spend ourselves inside one another.

ANTHONY'S P.O.V.

We collapse in a slick, sweaty heap on the bed, breathing hard, laughing and crying. It is so unreal and yet so joyous, being together again and able to love each other like this. After a while we manage to disentangle ourselves from one other and lie back on the pillows, Hannibal in the center - and isn't Hannibal always the center of our lives? - with his arms around Will and I. We rest our heads on his chest, nuzzling into the beautiful fur of his chest hair, stroking and caressing each other as if it is the last time. And with the events of the past few months, who's to say it isn't?

"Hannibal... Will... I love you both so much. So much," I begin, reaching over and brushing Will's curls from his eyes. "I meant what I said earlier, Hannibal," looking up at him in earnest. "I want to marry both of you. I never want to be parted from you again. I don't think I would survive another separation."

Hannibal smiles gently and kisses my temple. "Nor I, my darlings," he says, looking at me and then Will in turn. "But we are in a very complicated situation. Getting away from Augustuv will not be easy. We need to take our time, form an air-tight plan. I think we can count on Jean-Luc for his help with this."

"Francis, Reba and Chiyoh will help us as well," I add. "It can be done. We can do this."

"I will do absolutely anything for you both. Anything," declares Will. "We were meant to be together. I won't let anything stand in our way." He leans up to kiss Hannibal, then leans across to kiss me. It's almost like a pact between us.

Hannibal gathers us into his arms once again, and we lie contentedly holding each other for a while, heading steadily toward sleep. But an undercurrent of unease and worry has slithered into the room, despite this "all for one and one for all" moment. As I drift off into sleep, I can hear Chiyoh's voice at the edge of my consciousness...

Be wary... the Coiling Serpent will be lurking in the shadows.

The Poison of Asps

Chapter by UnknownMusing

Chapter Summary

> Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men;
> Preserve me from violent men,
> Who plan evil things in their hearts;
> They continually gather together for war.
> They sharpen their tongues like a serpent;
> The poison of asps is under their lips.
>
> - Psalm 140:1-3
>
> CW: Cordell rapes Le Chiffre in the last paragraph.

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

THE LAUGHING MUSE HOTEL

THE WEE HOURS OF THE NEXT MORNING

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

Stepping into the darkened hallway of my hotel room, I silently close the door behind me. My mind wanders back to the passionate moments I had spent with Will and Hannibal in my half-brother Augustuv's private study and guest bedroom.

Sighing softly, I head into the sitting room area. Something makes me pause, the hairs on the back of my neck starting to rise slightly. I place the hotel room key in my pocket and decide to go and check on the little ones - Lucien and Markus.

I walk through my sleeping quarters, past the bed where Pearl- Lace and I had consummated our reunion, to the sliding doors which lead into their bedroom.

I slide the double doors open quietly and step within the darkened room.

Lucien and Markus are still sleeping, thankfully, while Francis and Reba have both fallen asleep on the chaise lounge close to the bed.

His large hand rests on her back, and her head is lying on his chest. I fetch a spare blanket and gently place it over them. I walk around the large bed to check on the little ones who are both sleeping soundly. I bring the bed cover up around them from where it has slipped down a bit, and tenderly tuck them in.

Satisfied that they are sleeping comfortably, I turn to leave but feel Markus grab my arm by my sleeve. I turn and bend down slightly, and he buries his little face into my chest. "Move over just a little, so I can sit down," I whisper. He does, then buries his face deeper into my chest.

"Did you have a nightmare, Markus?" I ask him quietly, sifting my hand through his hair. I think some hot chocolate will help him.

Lifting him up, I place him on my hip and hear a sleepy murmur. Lucien, who it seems also cannot sleep, rises from the bed and follows close behind as I head out of their sleeping quarters, through mine to the sitting area, then over to the kitchen.

I switch on one of the lamps to illuminate the kitchen area as the sun slowly starts to rise over the sleeping city of Venice. I sit Markus on one of the kitchen stools, then refresh the water in the kettle while Lucien gets the hot chocolate tin from the cupboard.

"So how did it go?" I hear Reba asking me. She must have sensed that I had come into the bedroom to check up on the little ones. I chuckle lightly at her comment; we both know she is referring to the passionate evening I had spent with Pearl-Lace and Nimue.

* * * * * *

"Nimue, why... why are you crying, darling?"

"Oh, Anthony....my darling...I'm crying because I never thought I would see you again. I believed all this time, since I was brought here by your half-brother, that you were truly gone."

The three of us now stand in the sitting room, sated and happy after our ecstatic reunion. I lean forward to kiss Nimue on their sweet lips, feeling them at the same time pushing me gently backwards until my hips hit a small coffee table.

The kiss soon becomes bolder, our lips beginning to move against each other in a ravenous and hungry way. After hours of sweet lovemaking, we still cannot get enough of each other. I slip my hands downward to grip Nimue's hips while deepening the kiss. Finally I pull back to see a flushed face, lips swollen and pupils expanded with desire. Pearl-Lace comes up behind Nimue to place their hands over mine on Nimue's hips.

I watch them kiss heavily, their tongues entwining inside and outside their mouths as soft breathless moans and gasps come from them both. My voice is husky and low as I say, "I love you both so much, with all my aching heart." I reach into my trouser pocket and take out the ring box that has within it two rings, commissioned from the Attilio Codognato jewelers in Venice - one bearing an opal of aubergine suspended in the embrace of two fireflies; and the other a sea blue-green opal surrounded by silver fish.

They have both stopped kissing and are watching me silently - sea blue-green eyes and maroon eyes staring deep into my own - as I go down on one knee before them. I take a deep, shaky breath and then say:

"I...wish...for both of you to be mine. Will you both agree... to become mine forever?"

Nimue and Pearl-Lace look at each other, then at me, trembling smiles spreading across their beautiful faces. They reach out for their rings. I see Nimue slide off my half-brother's ring with a determined look, then walk over and place it on the mantelpiece close to a faded photo of Augustuv and I when we were young children, standing with an unknown woman. Nimue comes back over to us, slipping on my ring in place of Augustuv's, their eyes brimming again with happy tears. I have already placed the other ring on Pearl-Lace's finger. We stand for a moment with our foreheads pressed together, eyes closed, holding hands and smiling.

* * * * * *

I am gently nudged out of the tender memory by the boiling of the kettle. I fix two mugs of hot chocolate and place them in front of Lucien and Markus, warning them to be careful not to burn themselves.

The boys happily blow on the mugs and sip their hot chocolate gingerly as Francis enters the sitting room, yawning and covering his mouth. He walks over to Reba, kissing her on the cheek as she brings one hand up to cup his cheek.

Now that we are all awake, I decide perhaps breakfast is in order. Reba helps me in the kitchen while Francis and the boys down their hot chocolate and coffee, the boys telling me excitedly about yesterday's adventures featuring gondola rides and visits to zoos and aquariums.

All of us now sit outside on the balcony at a round table covered by a white cloth, eating a scrumptious breakfast of waffles, poached eggs, sliced tomatoes and sausages. Francis peruses a Venetian newspaper; Lucien and Markus talk with Reba who thankfully speaks Icelandic, as she had a cousin on her mother's side who was fluent in it and taught it to her.

Abruptly, a small flash of light, or perhaps a glint from something metallic, is glimpsed from the corner of my eye and draws my attention away from them.

I turn my gaze slightly to look across the canal at the source of the flash - an empty house with boarded-up windows and a sign reading "*CONDANNATO*" - "CONDEMNED" - as I casually pick up my cup of coffee and take a sip.

Francis must have noticed it as well, attuned as he is to being followed and watched. I continue to sip coffee between bites of breakfast and try to remain calm.

Whoever is watching us seems to be directing their attention only to myself.

A sudden loud knocking on the hotel room door causes me to tense immediately.

Everything goes still: Lucien and Markus stop talking to Reba, while Francis and I share a look. Only a handful of people know we are staying here. Placing my mug down, I get up out of the chair as he does the same, leaning down to whisper quickly into Reba's ear. Both of us head back inside quietly.

Reba, realizing something is wrong, hushes the little ones and leads them to the side of the balcony so they are not in the way of what might happen next. I am surprised when I realize my heart is not pounding in fear but is steadily calm as I slide the largest knife from the knife block in the kitchen.

Gripping it tightly in one hand, I retrieve with the other hand the devil's claw knife Nimue had gifted me. I creep to the hallway entrance of the hotel room and lean against the wall on the left hand side, as Francis does the same on the opposite side.

It doesn't take long for whoever it is to smash down the beautiful oak door and spill down the hallway into the sitting area. Francis and I lunge at the intruders who have turned to face us.

Everything dissolves into a crimson haze.

The surge of electricity from the taser which presses into my side causes me to collapse onto the hotel room carpet. I can feel my body jerking slightly with the aftershocks of the bolts which had shot through my body. Spitting out a Greek curse, I glare up at the hired thug standing over me.

I move to get up, gripping the devil's claw knife tightly in my hand, when suddenly a boot stamps down on it. The pain causes me to cry out loudly. Another surge of electricity courses through me, and my back arches heavily until I'm thrashing like an eel that has been brought up to the surface.

I must have cried out at some point in my own language, because I distantly hear Lucien and Markus crying out not "*Dimitri!*" but instead "***Papa!***" as they are brought past me. The taser is soon removed from my body, and I am allowed to lie there, gasping for breath, heart pounding against my rib cage as if threatening to escape. I turn my weary eyes and notice the other thug I had stabbed with the kitchen knife gingerly pulling it out from his side.

He probably shouldn't have done that, as it was keeping him from bleeding to death. The thug above me shouts "*Matteo!!!?*" as the unfortunate Matteo begins to spasm uncontrollably due to the blood loss.

"*...That wasn't meant to happen*," I hear myself mutter. Suddenly another surge from the taser effectively brings blackness swooping in faster than before.

I remember nothing thereafter.

Only worry for everyone I cherish and wish to protect.

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

COQUILLE'S PRIVATE RESIDENCE

MID MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Something does not quite feel right.

I glance once more at the text Augustuv had sent earlier this morning. He will not return until next Friday evening. Sighing softly, I place the phone on the makeup table and prepare myself for work at the Gallerie dell'Accademia.

Today I've decided to wear a new black and white striped pantsuit, adding silver earrings adorned with peacock feathers. Perusing my lipstick collection, I choose one called "Lavender Dream." Calmly and methodically I apply it to my lips, gazing into the makeup table mirror and liking what I see.

Satisfied, I blot my lips with a tissue and sit back in the ornate wooden makeup chair, feeling calm and relaxed. Soon I will be released from the metaphorical gilded cage in which Augustuv has trapped me, flying away with my darling angels - my *Death's Head Hawkmoth*, Anthony; and my *Mongoose*, Will - who will both become my husbands when we are at last free to marry.

I rise from my chair and take one more look at my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. The striped pantsuit is very smart. I gaze lovingly at Anthony's ring, still on my ring finger. I had left Augustuv's ring on the mantelpiece for him to find - an unmistakable message that I am now free from his poisonous influence. I walk to the door, turning to look one last time at our shared bedchamber, where ghostly images form as memories come to mind:

Augustuv making love to me when we had first arrived here in Venice; wrapping the bandage around my hand as we sat on the window seat, his eyes sparkling with happiness, joy and love for me.

Would that these were my only memories of what has transpired in this room.

LOCATION - VENICE, ITALY

THE DORSODURO DISTRICT

GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA

STILL MID MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

The open courtyard near my office in the Gallerie dell'Accademia is quiet, save for some workers in blue overalls packing artifacts, paintings and other objects into wooden crates to be shipped out to another Venice district. I make my way up the flight of stone steps, enjoying the sunlight that filters down from the glass roof above into the courtyard, and head toward my office.

I pass a janitor with whom I am unfamiliar. At this hour the cleaning is usually done by an old man affectionately known to all as Old Joe. I stop and turn, walking slowly back over to him. He catches sight of me and pauses in his duties, or more accurately, the pretense of his duties, as he is doing a frankly dismal job.

"Where is Old Joe? He is usually here around this time," I ask quietly. The startled young man is apparently not accustomed to being questioned. He drops the mop, stumbling backward and knocking over the pail of water in the process. Dirty, soapy water splashes onto my black patent leather shoes. *So rude*. With wide eyes he watches as I step closer, surreptitiously removing my devil's claw knife from my trouser pocket. I pull him flush against me, noting with cold satisfaction that he is beginning to tremble - the sickly sweet scent of fear filling my nostrils.

A bead of sweat starts to run down his forehead. My eyes narrow as I bend my head down and place my lips close to his ear, keeping the tip of the knife pressed against his groin.

*"Why don't you run back to your mummy like a good little boy? Or would you prefer....I sever your family jewels instead, as....**Il Mostro di Firenze**....is feeling rather hungry? Your decision, little piglet," I hiss into his ear.*

He quickly makes his decision, stumbling away frantically and sending the pail skidding across the floor. With a dark chuckle I place the knife back in my pocket, compose myself, turn on my heel and continue down the hall to my office.

Stepping inside the partially sunlit office, I pause abruptly as I detect the scent of Signora De Laurentiis' favorite perfume in the air. I lift my head to see her leaning against the desk near the window. She appears as though she hasn't slept a wink - her eyes bloodshot with dark circles beneath them, her hair mussed, and her usually impeccable clothing in disarray. It would appear that my premonition of earlier this morning is correct - something is most definitely wrong. Silently closing the door behind me, I force myself to place one foot in front of the other as I approach the desk.

At last I stand a respectable distance away, pursing my lips in thought. I do not want to have to kill this innocent woman - a woman who tried to help me when she had divined the nature of my relationship with Augustuv. I sigh heavily, realizing she has been told the truth about me.

"I believe you have been told something that has deeply affected you, Signora De Laurentiis. I would rather it had been on my own terms to tell you...the truth," I begin. The only other sounds in the room are the ticking of the clock, the hum of the aquarium in which a group of tetra fish swim, and the faint music coming through the open window as Venetian buskers serenade throngs of tourists.

I step closer, intending to raise a hand and cup her cheek in sympathy. But with a look of terror and remorse, she suddenly smashes her lips into mine with such desperation that my only thought is that she is under some kind of threat. Startled, I manage to push her back.

And then I hear her rough, pleading whisper - "*Forgive me!*" - as the bolts from a taser surge through my body.

Distantly I hear someone crying out - it is myself.

Collapsing to the carpet, I feel my body fall to one side, in spasm with painful aftershocks. I lie there with my heart furiously pounding against my rib cage. I hear the office door opening, and I silently retrieve the devil's claw knife - Anthony has its twin - keeping it hidden. The shadow of a man soon covers me, and I immediately flick my gaze upward to the burly hired thug looking down at me with barely concealed contempt.

Two others stand next to him, while several more guard the now closed office door, just in case anyone who comes looking for Signora Coquille get suspicious.

They flinch only slightly when they see my curled lip and cold stare. Rapidly composing themselves, they turn their malevolent attention to Signora De Laurentiis, who I can see is still holding the taser in her hand.

"Kill her," the leader barks. "Do it like one of Il Mostro di Firenze's tableaux."

I snarl loudly, the thought of these pigs killing an innocent woman making me see red. Quickly unfolding the knife, my arm slashes into the air as I plunge it straight into the leader's abdomen, the serrated blade ripping through soft flesh.

He emits a strangled cry as blood immediately spurts out from the wound, splattering the desk, walls and windows with crimson petals, as well as covering myself and Signora De Laurentiis. The poor woman lets out a high-pitched scream, drawing the rest of the thugs into the office. They are just in time to see their corpulent leader fall backwards onto the floor with a muffled thump, blood continuing to gush everywhere.

I stagger to my feet, glaring at the thugs bristling with their intent to capture me. With my blood singing through my veins, I feel all my personalities rise within me - *Il Mostro di Firenze*, Nimue and Carmina melding together to form one fierce entity:

Medeina- Forest Goddess of my birthplace.

"*You know....I really liked this suit*," I hear myself say, my voice sounding disembodied as if someone else is speaking through me. I lunge at the terrified group of thugs, hearing the strains of the ***Danse Macabre*** begin to echo through my mind palace.

The bodies of the hired thugs - some still alive, others having had their lives instantly severed - lie around the deserted courtyard which is completely covered with crimson petals.

Embedded into a far corner of the courtyard wall is a fountain in the shape of a clamshell. I lie slumped against the curved ribbed stone wall at the back, breathing laboriously and profusely sweating.

My lavender lipstick has become smeared into a macabre joker's grin. I reach for the stiletto that one of the thugs had managed to stab into my side - right before I had snuffed out his life. Gritting my teeth, I slowly pull it out and watch my blood gush out into the water, spreading crimson swirls through it.

Slipping off the blood-soaked suit jacket, I start to tear it into long strips with my teeth to make a makeshift bandage, tying it tightly around my waist. It is then that I hear someone coming into the courtyard. I slowly rise, a bit unsteady on my feet, and move to the other side, gripping the borrowed stiletto with a firm hand.

It has gone eerily quiet. Suddenly a flock of pigeons swoops up into the air behind me. l whirl around only to see that no one is there.

Without warning, taser prongs shoot into my injured side, directly over the wound, sending bolts of electricity coursing through me.

My back arches heavily, tears blinding my vision as excruciating pain incapacitates me. At last the prongs are removed, and I collapse over the rim of the clamshell fountain into the frigid water. A pair of large hands roughly turns me over, my head lolling to one side.

The owner of the hands bends down into my line of vision, and I find myself staring into a face that I had hoped and prayed I would never see again.

"*Hello, Il Mostro di Firenze... or should I say, Count Hannibal Lecter, son of Lord Draco Dvaras Lecter.*"

"***You!!!.....Velnio nerštas!!!*** *I swear....I'm going to tear out your entrails with my bare hands!!!*"

I snarl out a curse in my native tongue. But a bloodcurdling scream is wrenched from my lips as he again presses the taser prongs against my wound, increasing the voltage until darkness swoops in to claim me.

Anthony. Will. My....darlings....where...are you? It hurts....it hurts.....

<u>LOCATION - THE OUTSKIRTS OF BALTIMORE, MARYLAND</u>

<u>ON THE ROAD - APPROACHING VERGER FARM</u>

<u>THE FOLLOWING DAY - NIGHTTIME</u>

WILL'S P.O.V.

"Will...Mylimasis...Pearl-Lace, my love...Can you hear me? Are you all right?"

Fluttering my eyes open, I see before me in the dim light something swinging slightly side-to-side - a person? When my eyes finally become accustomed to the light, I can see that it is Hannibal, with Anthony chained to his back. All three of us are hanging upside down attached to meathooks by handcuffs, while our hands are also cuffed and our arms tied to our sides. We are inside some kind of van or truck which is currently rumbling down a road. Exactly where that road is is a mystery.

"I think so. What about the two of you?" I ask.

Hannibal swings himself closer and kisses me lightly on the lips. "I'm fine. Don't worry about us." He manages to turn himself a bit, allowing Anthony to face me somewhat.

"Slight head rush. But it will pass I'm sure, Pearl-Lace," he mutters with a wry smile. He opens his mouth to continue when the large meat van we are in (as I found out later; the overwhelming stench should have been my first clue) bumps over something in the road. The van rattles and jolts as we slam into each other like clacking billiard balls. It would almost be funny if the situation were not so dire.

The van soon stops, all of us feeling slightly dazed and a little nauseous from the smell. The double doors are thrown open. We turn our gaze to see a Sardinian thug - a dark, mean-looking man named Carlos - and standing next to him, none other than Detective Rinaldo Pazzi.

We are taken down from the meathooks, the ropes removed from around our arms, and then hauled outside into the cool night air. I look at the ground and see the driver of the van had to swerve to avoid something - from the look of the tracks it might have been a stag. For a moment I think I see a raven's wing, but it fades away before I can fully process it.

Two black vehicles have been parked close to the meat van. I am roughly hauled over to one of them, Anthony with Hannibal to the other. We manage a last fleeting look at one another before I am chucked carelessly into the trunk and the lid slammed down, dousing me in complete darkness.

LOCATION - THE OUTSKIRTS OF BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

THE TRUNK OF THE SECOND BLACK VEHICLE

ON THE ROAD - APPROACHING VERGER FARM

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

"I would say this isn't the most....comprising position I've been in. But...it is by far the most uncomfortable."

Hannibal, who has managed to roll over to face me in the stifling confines of the trunk, rests his cuffed hands on my chest. I can't move because my hands have been cuffed behind my back.

"And what, my darling Anthony, *was* the most comprising position you've been in?" he purrs in his Nimue voice. Smirking - even though he can't see it, there is no doubt he can sense it - I place my lips against his ear.

"Hmm, wouldn't you like to know, sweet Nimue. I do remember the time you were straddling my lap, when we kissed under the sakura blossoms that hung over the bench in Florence, when you were working at the Palazzo Capponi. At the time I barely resisted the deep, swelling urge to just take you right then and there. Fill you up and feel you...tighten....around my aching hard cock," I reply breathlessly. Hannibal fists his hands into my shirt with a sigh. Bending my head down, I seek out his lips in the dark, only for him to give a light chuckle.

"That is my nose, Anthony. These...are my lips."

Bringing his cuffed hands to my face, he pulls my head down and our lips touch. And the breathless kisses start.

Small whimpers, pants and gasps escape Hannibal's mouth as he quickly swings his thigh over my hip. As our lips move against each other, he starts to grind his groin into mine. Flicking my tongue over his lips, I seek admittance, which he allows. Soon our tongues are entwining within and outside our mouths until finally he pulls back to breathe. Resting his forehead against mine, he quickly slips his cuffed hands down to elevate the arousal we had built up, then buries his face into my chest. I long to take his face in my hands and caress those sinful cheekbones, but since I can't I content myself with kissing the crown of his head.

Praying deep down that the rest of the ones I cherish and wish to protect will be all right.

LOCATION - THE OUTSKIRTS OF BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

THE VERGER FARM AND ESTATE

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

"Welcome, gentlemen. I trust you had a nice trip."

As Hannibal and I are roughly hauled out of the vehicle's trunk, we are brought face to face with the man behind this kidnapping charade - Mason Verger, permanently scarred by Will after Augustuv had sent him to this vile pig of man. His snide, whining voice sets my teeth on edge.

A cry of "*Papa!!*" from Lucien and Markus causes me to whirl around in shock, looking towards another car that has pulled up. Immediately feeling the other half of me trapped in that car, I turn to glare balefully at Verger, who saunters over and flicks his gaze to the little ones, then back to me.

"Ahhh....you're rather protective of them, ain't you, Dimmond? I wonder what would happen if I...fed them to...my pigs," he drawls.

I lunge at him with a snarl. "I swear, if you lay a hand on them, I'll sever your throat with my teeth."

"Whoo...bit feisty isn't he, Hannibal? Is he any good in bed, I wonder?" Verger goads, reaching up to stroke my cheek. Behind me, Hannibal keeps me in check by holding my cuffed hands.

Verger's hand never reaches my face. A storm of violent shouting and cursing interrupts him. Turning my face, I see it is Le Chiffre, struggling to free himself from the thugs who hold him back as his lover, Duncan, is dragged in front of us by two burly, muscular henchmen and flung down to the ground. He lands with a pained grunt, then staggers to his feet and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You have some fucking nerve, Mr. Mason Verger, son of the lately deceased Silas Morik Verger, trying to get away with this kidnapping. What will Daddy think now?" Duncan spits out. He must have struck a nerve, for Verger slaps him hard across the face. But Duncan merely smirks, as if to say "*Is that the best you got?*"

"When all this is over, you will get what you deserve. I definitely won't be holding back," Duncan growls.

A pained cry comes from one of the thugs holding Le Chiffre, who has had enough. He had slammed his foot into the henchman's kneecap, instantly shattering it. He scrambles over to his lover, who embraces him and cradles the back of his head as Le Chiffre buries his face into the crook of his neck.

I begin to wonder where my darling Will could be when gunshots cause us all to stiffen. We can hear cursing and screaming coming from my third lover, directed at the thugs who have dragged him out of the trunk of the car. I gasp as I see Pepilo and Winston bolt from the car holding Lucien and Markus and run for their lives into the woodland before disappearing from sight. I put two and two together and am relieved they are alive and well - thanks to Will, the passionate dog lover.

Will, after kicking the hell out of the thugs that tried to shoot Pepilo and Winston, grabs the boys' hands and they rush over to Hannibal and I, embracing us both. Will immediately smashes his lips into mine and we quickly kiss, then he turns to Hannibal and kisses him as well. I kneel down and let Lucien and Markus throw their arms around me as the tears begin to fall. I long so much to hold them in return.

We are interrupted by Verger snarling in displeasure. "I almost hate to break up this touching little reunion." He turns his head to snap at his thugs.

"Take them inside, separate them and change those god-awful clothes they're wearing for something more...appealing."

LOCATION - THE OUTSKIRTS OF BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

THE VERGER MANSION - GUEST BEDROOM #1

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

Being separated from my loves and placed in this bedroom is painful, but I do feel very glad to finally have those cuffs off my wrists. Glancing about the room, I rub them briskly to get the circulation going again, noting a suit of dark maroon with a white lace-ruffled shirt that has been laid out on the bed.

First, though, I decide to have a shower to rid myself of the dust, grime and filth that has accumulated after being hung upside down in a stinking meat van for hours - not to mention enduring the stifling confines of the trunk of a car.

I prayed for the well-being of my loved ones, somewhere in this huge mansion, and also for Pepilo and Winston, somewhere out in the woodlands surrounding the Verger farm.

LOCATION - THE OUTSKIRTS OF BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

THE VERGER MANSION - GUEST BEDROOM #2

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Tilting my head backward into the lukewarm spray of the shower, I sigh softly, feeling the tension in my body seep away to nothing. I watch as steam fills the bathroom and condenses on the glass surfaces.

The wound in my side has been stitched up and covered with a waterproof bandage by Mason's medic and chef, Dr. Cordell Doemling. I suddenly remember seeing Detective Pazzi - who had been hired by Mason to bring Will, Anthony and myself to the Verger estate - being paid handsomely for his work. I decide then and there that he will die in the manner of his famous ancestor.

Smiling with grim satisfaction, I reach for the sweet-smelling shampoo and rub it into my hair. The memory of Will, Anthony and myself sharing a shower after waking from our lovemaking comes to the forefront of my mind. After washing out the shampoo I switch off the shower, letting rivulets of water run down my body.

Lowering my head to idly watch the remaining water swirling down the drain, I am startled by a droplet of crimson that drips down into it. I bring a hand up to my right eye and suddenly realize what it means.

Jean-Luc!!!?

LOCATION - THE OUTSKIRTS OF BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

THE VERGER FARM AND ESTATE - THE CELLAR NEAR THE PIG PEN MAZE

JEAN-LUC LE CHIFFRE'S P.O.V.

The sickening smell of burning flesh fills my nostrils. My hands have been spread out and placed in leather cuffs attached to ropes. I remain still, not making a sound as Cordell Doemling - Verger's chef and medic of sorts - brands me between my shoulder blades with the Verger seal. He presses himself against me while placing a cool cloth over the brand, soothing the burning pain. I can feel his sickly breath on my cheek as he pants slightly.

I knew from the way he had looked at me when I had been brought in that he wanted me for himself. I heard him whispering something to Verger, who had smirked at me indicating one thing that I had been signed over to Cordell. Forced into a marriage to a man, I do not want to marry.

He soon steps away, taking the cloth with him, and comes around to look at me. A bead of blood trickles down from my scarred eye. He reaches forward with the cloth to dab it away as Duncan, in another pen, growls in warning. Cordell raises an eyebrow at my lover and soon-to-be husband.

"You really do look like your brother. It's too bad your ex-husband Augustuv-Magnus Coquille scarred such a...*pretty face*....Jean-Luc Le Chiffre Lecter, formerly Coquille," Cordell purrs. He moves behind me and places his sweaty palm on my back, sliding it slowly downward. I find myself giving a hitched gasp before I can stop myself when he cups my groin from behind.

Duncan, trembling in the ropes that bind him, tries frantically to get free as I feel myself pushed down onto the filthy hay of the pig pen, my head to one side. My hands shoot outward to grip the bars when suddenly Cordell - wearing protection but without lube - slams himself into me, jolting my body back and forth with each hog-like thrust.

I look at Duncan, howling with rage, thrashing against the ropes in a desperate bid to free himself and rescue me.

I mouth the words "*I....love you, my Hawk*."

Duncan's howls are joined now by his sobs.

Gripping the pig pen bars for support, I bear the pain as tears begin to run down my cheeks - a mixture of blood and water - and drip onto the hay.

I can bear....this.....I can bear this as long...as you are here, Duncan, my Hawk.....I can bear this...for the both of us.

Vengeance is Mine

Chapter Summary

> Vengeance is Mine, and recompense;
> Their foot shall slip in due time;
> For the day of their calamity is at hand,
> And the things to come hasten upon them.
>
> - Deuteronomy 32:35

LOCATION - THE OUTSKIRTS OF BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

THE VERGER ESTATE AND MUSKRAT FARM

NIGHTTIME

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Freshly showered and changed into a clean set of clothes (Mason has, ironically or not, provided me with a forest green version of my old stand-by, a three-piece suit with tie and pocket square), I join Will and Anthony in the hallway. Both are similarly attired. Will has never looked more handsome in navy blue, but Anthony for some reason has been given a ridiculous lacy white shirt to wear with his otherwise impeccable maroon suit. It makes him look like a teenager on his way to prom, and I cannot help but smile. Anthony rolls his eyes and smiles back. At the very least, we have managed to retain our senses of humor throughout this ordeal.

One of Mason's armed henchmen appears behind us. "All right, that's enough," he barks. "Time for dinner, gentlemen." Another thug ambles before us from a side hallway, sneering and caressing his AR-15. He gestures for us to follow him, and thus escorted, we make our way to the spacious dining room of the Verger mansion.

Mason is seated at the head of the dining table, a patch over his right eye and a scowl on his loathsome face. Seated to his right is his sister Margot, and across from her, I am surprised to note, Alana Bloom. Anthony had informed me earlier that they are now a couple. Will wonders never cease?

Next to Margot is my half-brother, Jean-Luc, and across from him is his lover, Duncan. They also have changed into fresh clothes, but they are staring across the table at one another and

both look traumatized. Jean-Luc takes occasional puffs from his rescue inhaler and dabs a handkerchief to his weeping eye. I remind myself to speak to him about that at some later date, as it would appear I have now developed the same condition.

Anthony's little charges, Lucien and Markus, are seated next to Duncan looking very frightened. Their eyes light up when they see Anthony, and with a shout of "*Papa!!*" they leap from their chairs and run to him. The lead thug attempts to stop them, but Mason raises a hand.

"It's all right, Vito," he drawls. "I do love a tearful reunion." Anthony kneels down and hugs the boys to him tightly, kissing and soothing them. There are many things I will never forgive Mason for, but subjecting innocent children to this nightmare is at the top of the list.

Anthony leads the boys back to the table, seating himself between them. I take the seat next to Jean-Luc, and Will sits down beside me. I place my hand gently over my brother's. It is trembling.

"Are you all right?" I whisper.

He takes another shaky puff from the inhaler, then glances over to me. "I will be," he whispers back, so quietly I can barely hear him. I squeeze his hand encouragingly and release it.

"Well!" Mason claps his hands with glee and rubs them together. "Now that we're all together like one big happy family, let's start the first course, shall we? Cordell, serve the oysters!"

WILL'S P.O.V.

The tray of oysters is passed around the table and eaten with varying degrees of success by the dinner guests. I am not overly fond of the things, and I can't help but direct a snide remark at our host.

"Trust you, Mason, to serve something just as slimy and smelly as you are for the first course."

Hannibal, tipping an oyster shell into his mouth and swallowing its contents in one gulp, turns to me and smiles proudly. I wink at him in return.

Mason leans his elbows on the table, rests his chin on his hands and contemplates me with his one good eye. "You know, Mr. Graham," he begins thoughtfully, "ever since I hired *Commendatore* Pazzi to hunt you down and return you to me, I've been thinking about what I'm going to do to you to... *repay* you for the little injury you inflicted upon me." He gestures toward the patch over the eye that I essentially blinded the last time we were together. A small smile of satisfaction spreads across my face. That *was* good, wasn't it? I glance up to see Alana and Margot observing me worriedly.

"So, I thought," Mason continues, "since you ruined my face, maybe I should just... take *yours* instead? It's such a *nice face*." He glances up at Cordell who stands attentively at his side, hands clasped behind his back. "Cordell here is an absolute *whiz* with a surgical knife." Cordell gives a modest little bow and smiles broadly at me.

Le Chiffre coughs breathlessly and takes several puffs from his inhaler. Duncan is glaring at Cordell, nothing but murder written across his rugged, weathered face.

"Why Mason," Hannibal purrs. "You've thought of everything."

"I like to think so," replies Mason. "But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Now Cordell, let's have the main course, shall we?"

ANTHONY'S P.O.V.

The main course, ratatouille with grilled sausages and pasta, is finally served. The boys have pretty much lost their appetite (unsurprisingly, they scrunched up their faces at the oysters and refused to touch them). This part of the meal is much more appealing to them, but they are still extremely nervous and scared. I encourage them to get down as much food as they can. I have a feeling they are going to need their strength tonight.

"So, Mason," I say, chewing on a sausage. "I assume these sausages were made from your pigs? Well - I can honestly say -" I finish chewing and swallow reluctantly - "that they are - *horrible!!*" I grab my glass of wine and gulp it down in a desperate attempt to wash down the sausage. "My *God* - what do you feed those poor things? Industrial waste?"

The meat is actually quite delicious. I am just trying to rile him up. It works.

"Dimmond, you are seriously working my last good nerve," Mason growls. "Those pigs died for your sins! Now eat! Or -" his gaze falls on Lucien and Markus. "Or I'll give them... something *else* to eat. Something.... *very tasty*...." An evil grin works its way across his vile face.

My blood begins to boil. "You try it, Verger, and it will be the last thing you ever do on this earth," I say in a very low and icy tone. "The *very - last - thing*." Instinctively I take the boys' hands in mine and pull them closer to me. Everyone at the table is staring at Verger as if he were the devil incarnate. His armed thugs step forward, ready to quell whatever mayhem threatens to take place. Hannibal and Will glance around the room without moving their heads, taking note of our surroundings. The air is thick with tension and menace.

Mason looks around the table defiantly, taking us all in. Unbeknownst to me, two more thugs have entered and are slowly approaching the boys and I from behind. Will, his eyes wide, looks at me, then behind me, then back to me and quickly nods in warning. But before I can comprehend his meaning, Mason stands and roars at his thugs:

"DO IT!!!"

What happens next happens so fast it is all an overlapping blur.

The two thugs grab the boys from their chairs and whisk them out of the room.

The boys scream and cry, holding out their arms to me.

I leap from my seat and am hit in the head by one of the armed thugs with the butt of his AR-15. I drop to the ground and fight off unconsciousness.

Everyone at the table jumps from their chairs.

With a snarl, Duncan charges at Mason, grabs his head and slams it down hard into his bowl of ratatouille. The bowl shatters and Mason falls to the floor, knocked out cold.

Will, Hannibal and Le Chiffre pull knives from their sock garters and attack the armed thugs. The thugs are dead before their fingers even reach the triggers.

Duncan charges after Cordell, a large Bowie knife in his hand.

Alana and Margot are dragging Mason's limp body out of the room and to who knows where.

Hannibal, Le Chiffre and Will kneel beside me and check to see that I am all right. They help me to my feet, and the four of us race out of the room and head out toward the hog barn.

Lucien... Markus.... Papa is coming... Stay strong, my loves... Papa is coming...

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

The mansion is large and difficult to navigate, hallways twisting and turning in every direction. I am unsure of the exact location of the hog pen. As I run I tear off my bloodied suit jacket and waistcoat, tossing them carelessly behind me. I hear Jean-Luc's increasingly distant voice shout "*Hannibal! This way!*" I turn toward his voice but realize I have lost the three of them. I continue to run in what I hope is the right direction when three more henchmen come racing around a corner.

My inner predator once again springs forward. In spite of the fact that all three are armed with conventional handguns, they are quickly dispatched. One of them manages to get off a shot, winging my right shoulder but failing to slow me down as I snap his neck. They soon lie dead in the hallway, a bloody trail of slashed throats, gutted abdomens and broken necks.

I race down the endless corridors towards what I am sure must be the door leading to the hog pens. I turn a corner and come to an abrupt halt when I see who is storming towards me.

Agent Jack Crawford. And my soon-to-be-ex-husband, Augustuv-Magnus Coquille.

For a moment the three of us stand frozen, staring at one another, Crawford's gun drawn and pointing directly at me. Augustuv's eyes widen as he takes in my torn, bloody clothes and gore-stained knife. He backs away several steps, his arm stretched toward me. He begins babbling in fear.

"Don't hurt me, Nim- *Hannibal*, I beg you, Hannibal, *please*. This isn't my fault, believe me, I had *nothing* to do with -"

"*Augustuv!* If you know what is good for you, you will turn around and leave and *never* come back. *Now*," I bark at him. With one last glance at Crawford, he turns and runs off down the corridor.

"You've not seen the last of me, Hannibal! This is not over!" he shouts defiantly as he flees.

My gaze snaps back to Crawford, still brandishing his gun. He shakes his head sadly. "Hannibal. Do you have any idea how long we've been looking for you? *And* Will? *And* Dimmond? We got an anonymous tip that the three of you were seen here. Please, if you'll just come with me we can end this-"

I quickly turn and bolt before he can finish his sentence. He races after me, shouting for me to stop. I duck into an unused room off the corridor and slam the door, but Crawford kicks it in moments later.

The room, some kind of office, is dark save for the light from the hallway. The only sound to be heard is our panting breaths.

"*Hannibal! Don't make me shoot you!*" Crawford bellows. I can see by his silhouette that he is still pointing the gun at me. He slowly enters the room and turns cautiously, attempting to ascertain just where I am. I do my best to quiet my breath and keep still.

"I know you're in here, Hannibal," he says, much more quietly. "Let's end this now. Come back with me and help me put this whole sorry mess to bed."

Crawford is now standing with his back partially turned to me. Now is the time to make my move. I slowly creep forward, knife in hand.

Suddenly he goes still. One more half-turn to his right and he will be facing me.

I lunge forward at the exact moment Crawford turns. With all my strength I knock his arms upward. The gun goes off, firing a bullet into the ceiling.

He loses his balance and begins to fall backward. I take advantage of his downward momentum and land a solid hit to his jaw. He falls hard onto his back, the wind momentarily knocked from his lungs.

The gun flies from his hands and lands near the door. I throw my knife after it. I want this to be a fair fight.

And it is. What Crawford lacks in speed and finesse of movement, he more than makes up for in brute strength. Punches land hard, chairs are thrown, a bookcase is tipped over. The room is filled with the sounds of crashing furniture, labored breaths and grunts of effort and pain. A well-placed head butt makes Crawford stagger back, dazed. I see my opportunity and make a dash for a nearby window, quickly unlocking it and hauling it up and open. A quick glance tells me I must be twenty feet above the ground.

For a moment we both just stand there, breathing hard, not taking our eyes off one another. I slowly lower myself to the windowsill and straddle it, steeling myself for the jump.

"Hannibal," Crawford pants, attempting to catch his breath. "Don't do this. You'll be captured anyway. Come with me now. It's over."

"And how will it make you feel, Jack, when I *am* captured? Locked away? Gone?" I ask, my body tensing.

Crawford draws himself up to his full imposing height. "*Alive*," he proclaims.

I give him a weary but wry smile. "Sorry, Jack." And I haul my leg over the sill and jump.

I curl up my body cannonball-style as I fall, hitting the ground with powerful force and landing on my injured shoulder. Wincing with pain, I stagger to my feet and take a few cautious steps, insuring that no bones have been broken. It is then that I hear Will's voice. "*Hannibal! Over here!*"

Oh, thank God! I run as fast as my feet can carry me in the direction of his voice. When I reach the hog pens, I see Will, Le Chiffre and Anthony standing outside with Lucien and Markus. Anthony is holding Markus tightly in his arms, comforting the still crying boy, while Le Chiffre carries Lucien in his arms, the boy's arms around his neck. The children are dirty and frightened, but alive. I want nothing more than to envelop them all in a relieved embrace, but there simply isn't time.

A cursory glance inside the pen reveals six of Mason's henchmen lying dead in the dirt.

Suddenly a Land Rover roars up and screeches to a halt before us. Duncan leaps out and quickly begins herding us all inside. The boys squeal with delight when they spy Winston and Pepilo in the back seat, tails wagging frantically.

We rapidly get ourselves settled and buckled in, and Duncan speeds the Land Rover out of Muskrat Farm like the proverbial bat out of hell. "Where to, Hannibal?" he calls.

I fish my mobile phone from my trouser pocket. "There is a private airfield owned by a friend of mine about fifty miles east of here. I'll give you directions momentarily." I press the speed dial, hold the phone up to my ear and wait.

"Chiyoh. Arrange for a small private jet to meet us at Fuller Airfield in an hour. Is the Tuscany safe house ready? Good. Thank you, Chiyoh. We'll see you soon."

ALANA BLOOM'S P.O.V.

Dear God, Mason is heavy.

It takes all of my and Margot's strength to half-drag, half-carry Mason upstairs to his bedroom. He starts to come to as we enter the room, muttering incoherently as we toss him onto the bed and wonder what to do next. My eyes widen as I look down to see a large glass-topped aquarium embedded in the floor. There is... *something* moving around inside of it. Something huge, undulating and snake-like. I glance up at Margot, puzzled.

She meets my gaze, arms folded across her chest. "An eel," she intones.

I have met many unsavory people in my life, but none as repulsive as Mason Verger. After hearing Margot's horrendous stories of her lifelong abuse at his hands, I can think of nothing I would enjoy better than seeing him dead.

Mason sits up woozily, apparently unaware of where he is. "Cordell? *Cordell!*" he hollers. He finally notices us standing in front of him, looking at him with barely concealed contempt.

"Hi, Mason," I smile. "Cordell's dead. Mr. Vizla took care of him. Seems he took a rather dim view of Cordell raping his lover."

"What? Oh, come on, Dr. Bloom, I had nothing to do with that," he protests. "What the hell is happening around here anyway? Why does my head hurt and why am I bleeding?" he whines pathetically, touching several deep cuts on his face from the shattered bowl and gaping at the blood covering his fingers.

"I'm guessing it might have something to do with Mr. Vizla slamming your head into the table and ruining a perfectly good bowl of ratatouille," Margot drawls. God, I love her.

"Anyway, Hannibal escaped with Will, Anthony, Le Chiffre, Mr. Vizla and the boys," I chime in. "And everyone else is dead. It's just the three of us now, Mason." I am truly enjoying the confounded look on his face.

Mason rises unsteadily to his feet and glares at us, at the same time reaching over to his bedside table and pulling open the drawer. Before we can stop him, he withdraws his gun from the drawer and points it directly at me.

"Three will soon become one, Dr. Bloom," he declares, a malicious grin spreading across his features. "And you will be the first to go. Sorry to do this to you, Margot," he adds with cloyingly false sympathy. "You two make such a lovely couple."

Three things happen in quick succession: I dart to the side, Margot rushes Mason, and the gun fires. The bullet misses me and shatters the glass of the aquarium.

As Margot crashes into her brother, they lose their balance and tumble into the aquarium's dark waters. Mason attempts to hold Margot's head beneath the water, but I rush to pry his hand from her neck and pull her up to safety. We glance briefly at each other, then together we wrestle Mason back down into the aquarium's depths.

The blood seeping from his facial wounds entices the aquarium's occupant from its lair. Mason is still struggling mightily, but Margot and I seem to be under the influence of some avenging angel, lending us its relentless strength as we continue to hold him down. The eel begins to tear at his wounds, and Mason emits a muffled scream. The creature slides into his open mouth, a truly grotesque sight. Mason's struggling steadily lessens and finally stops.

Margot and I release his body and watch it sink down to the bottom of the aquarium. Panting and trembling, we rise and look at one another with expressions of horror and relief. I pull the coverlet off the bed and begin to dry Margot's hair and upper body with it, pressing our foreheads together and gazing deeply into each other's eyes.

We have become the Murder Wives.

Forgetting Those Things Which Are Behind

Chapter Summary

> Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended:
> but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind,
> and reaching forth unto those things which are before.
> - Philippians 3:13
>
> CW: Extremely dubious consent

LOCATION - TUSCANY, ITALY

THE TUSCANY SAFE HOUSE

EARLY DAWN

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"You sure you don't want anything?" I ask Jean-Luc quietly as he leans against Duncan for support. He shakes his head. I embrace him in a gentle hug, feeling him trembling heavily in my arms. He pulls away with a weak smile and allows Duncan to lead him upstairs.

Sighing softly, I head over to where Anthony and Will are sitting on the sofa near the fireplace, where a fire crackles gently in the hearth. Sitting down between them, I see Will napping with a tumbler of whiskey held loosely in his hand as Anthony calmly sketches in his sketchpad with charcoal pencils. Winston and Pepilo are curled up together in front of the fire, fast asleep.

Reaching over, I take the tumbler out of Will's hand before it falls onto the floor and ruins the carpet, placing it on the coffee table. I take a sip from my mug and see Anthony smiling at us both.

Finally we are all together and can relax. But I find I am unable to completely relax because of....*The Plan*..... I have started to put into motion, while having to keep it from Anthony and Will.

"Is something wrong, Hannibal?" Anthony asks. I shake my head with a soft smile. He puts down his sketchpad and leans over to kiss me on the lips.

One of his hands comes up, sifting through my hair, and the other goes to rest on my thigh, caressing up and down slowly. I feel Will slipping behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist as Anthony releases my lips to allow me to kiss Will. Anthony's deft hands begin to unbutton my pink salmon shirt and waistcoat.

Anthony's hands are warm on my bare skin. He splays his fingers over my rib cage and bends his head down to kiss gently over my heart. He then starts to kiss his way downward, as Will continues to kiss me passionately.

"Spread your legs, Nimue....my love," Anthony says, voice husky with arousal as he rises to his knees on the sofa. I do as he commands and spread my legs as he continues to kiss his way down my body. He unbuckles my belt, pulls my trouser zipper down and releases my stiff, leaking cock from my boxers.

Will, meanwhile, moves his hands to cup my nipples, rolling and pinching them between his fingers, causing me to moan breathlessly into his mouth. I feel liquid heat pool into my groin. I have no choice but to release Will's lips and cry out softly when Anthony, now kneeling between my legs, bends his head down between my thighs that he now holds in the crook of his elbows.

My heart starts to pound heavily in my chest and my face flushes crimson, the heat spreading down my neck as well. Anthony soon begins to bob his head up and down between my thighs, tasting me intimately. I find myself overwhelmed with emotion and pleasure as Will trails his lips up and down my neck.

Feeling my lovers licking, sucking and biting me makes me moan wantonly. My nipples rise and peak due to Will's ministrations as I slide my hands down to cradle Anthony's head - one stroking his cheekbone and the other sifting through his hair.

"Oh, oh, oh.... Anthony.....Will.....my darlings.....Oh, oh!!!"

LOCATION - TUSCANY, ITALY

THE TUSCANY SAFE HOUSE - SECOND GUEST BEDROOM

EARLY DAWN

JEAN-LUC LE CHIFFRE'S P.O.V.

Uhh....ahh...Duncan....Duncan.....I'm so close."

"Look at me....Look at me, Jean-Luc. Come for me."

A soft breathless cry escapes my lips as I tense beneath Duncan on the soft silk sheets of the bed, feeling him stiffen against me in turn. Both of us collapse on top of the sheets, and he gently slips out of me and lies down beside me. I feel disappointed that he cannot completely fill me as he wishes. I watch him slip the filled condom off, tie it and fling it into the waste basket near the adjoining bathroom door.

But we can still make love. Feeling him again against my body soothes me. He smiles down at me, stroking a strand of slightly damp fringe from my forehead. He slips off the bed, going over to where his jacket is slung over one of the armchairs.

He takes something out of the pocket, clasping it tightly in his hand and comes back over to me. He settles himself in front of me, then takes a deep breath. He looks up at me nervously as he reveals to my eyes a small black case which he opens to reveal, nestled within, a ring with four opals of creme white and a hawk guarding over them.

"Jean-Luc...will....will you....marry me?" he asks with hesitation, the fear of rejection plain in his eyes.

I feel my heart skipping a double beat. I rise and straddle his lap, repeating the words "Yes....Yes.....Duncan....I'll marry you!" again and again. He smiles and takes hold of my hand to slip the ring onto my ring finger. He then pulls me in and kisses me soundly, holding me in his lap as sunlight filters through a gap in the curtains.

After long moments we pull back, both of us smiling at each other. He clasps my cheeks in his hands and pulls me into another tender kiss.

SEVERAL DAYS LATER

LOCATION - THE TUSCANY SAFE HOUSE

EARLY AFTERNOON

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Keeping Will and Anthony in the dark about...*The Plan*.....is the only way I can protect them. They have no idea that Augustuv has been following us - from Venice, to the Verger estate, then finally to here, the Tuscany safe house near the coast. I plan to keep it that way.

It is a dangerous plan, and yet I know it is the only way to completely rid ourselves of that snake of a man who has destroyed so many lives, most of all my darling Abigail's. When she arrived here a few days ago, she looked so lost and broken that it pained my heart. We all held her tightly and assured her that she was with her family now; she will be safe, always. Since then, she has found comfort and solace especially in the form of Mischa, a gentle bond developing between them that brings me much happiness.

Sighing softly, I return to collecting herbs from the herb garden outside the kitchen double sliding doors. I can hear Lucien and Markus playing with Winston as Pepilo rests on the porch, looking haughty due to being pregnant with pups. Will and Anthony are busy clearing the covered-in-crimson fiery *hedera helix* and pruning the many types of roses that surround it.

Duncan and Jean-Luc are relaxing in the wicker porch chairs with Francis and Reba, who have brought their own dogs with them. They are chatting softly among themselves about mundane things and the fact that Reba and Francis are going to have a baby soon.

After getting the necessary herbs for the meal I'm preparing, I go to head inside when I hear Will calling me - "*Hannibal!"* I turn to see he is waving me over. I walk across the lawn as my feathered earrings swing slightly, glinting in the sunlight. Will takes my arm to lead me into the shade of the large trees above us, then further down until we come to a stop near a clear pool of water.

Anthony comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around me as I lean softly back against him. I feel him splay his hands over my chest as it rises and falls under my off-the-shoulder black jumper. He begins to pepper gentle kisses up and down my neck.

"*Nimue*, tell us. Something is worrying you. What's wrong?" Anthony asks with a worried frown. I turn my face to look at him, and bringing one hand up to cradle the back of his head, I answer them both with a lie and a smile.

"Just wedding jitters, nothing more. I still can't believe that soon I will be married to both of you, my darling…*angels,"* I lie to them, hoping it will convince them for now. Will reaches up to cup my cheek in his hand and rests his forehead against mine as I allow both of them to hold me in their arms.

*Forgive me, my darlings……. But you must be kept in the dark. It is the only way to protect you and our…**our** family.*

SEVERAL DAYS LATER

LOCATION - TUSCANY, ITALY

THE SMALL TOWN OF VILENAS

COQUILLE'S TUSCANY APARTMENT

MID MORNING

AUGUSTUV-MAGNUS COQUILLE'S P.O.V.

Nimue… Why did you do this to me?

Why... why did you leave me like this?

Trembling heavily, I bury my face in my hands and feel the tears begin to flow. I fling the bottle of whisky I've been drowning my sorrows in at the wall, where it shatters into a thousand glittering amber glass shards. I feel the *Inner Serpent* rising within me.

Lowering my hands, I get up off the bed and walk unsteadily to the window. I pull the curtain back to look down at the market square, where throngs of tourists and locals go about their daily lives.

It is the sight of a familiar figure walking through the throngs of people that causes me to place one hand on the window for support. There is no mistaking the tall figure of *Nimue* making their way through the crowd. My heart leaps into my throat.

They are wearing a deep maroon off-the-shoulder top and long crème-white skirt with Sweet Williams stitched upon it - so lovely... I step away from the window to grab my coat off the back of the armchair, rushing out of the residence as I slip it on – barely remembering to lock the door behind me.

Quickly I run down the flight of curving stairs and out into the street. Breathing steadily in and out to calm myself, I begin to follow them through the crowd, observing how they seem to be heading toward a specific destination.

Suddenly *Nimue* stops, turning only slightly. I walk up behind them and take hold of their arm.

LOCATION - TUSCANY, ITALY

THE SMALL TOWN OF VILENAS

THE MARKET SQUARE AND ALLEYWAY

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

“Don’t run…Don’t scream... Don't do anything…”

Augustuv whispers in my ear. My heart begins to pound strongly; I didn't expect him to find me so soon. I feel him wrap his arm around my waist as he indicates to me to keep on walking the route I’ve been taking.

Neither of us says anything as we continue to stroll calmly, acting like a couple simply enjoying ourselves in the market square. But deep down, I’m afraid that… *The Plan*… I have been carefully crafting has all gone wrong. Passing a stall with some crates stacked up close by, he turns me into an alleyway, leading me away from the hustle and bustle of the market. We then turn to the right, where he suddenly slams me up against the stone brick wall of the alleyway.

A hand goes to my throat, forcing it upwards and tightening. Desperately I place both hands on his wrist in an attempt to make him release me. He bends his lips down to my ear.

*“You left me… Why!!!?...Don’t you know… how much **pain** you have caused me?*” he hisses venomously, tightening his grip. My vision begins to fade in and out of focus until at last he releases his hold and allows me to breathe. He dares to cup my cheek with the hand he nearly choked me with.

“Augustuv, please? I…You know why,” I plead. I turn my face as tears start to well up in my eyes. All at once I manage to get away from him and start to run. But he follows me and then suddenly his hand grabs my wrist, pulling me back flush against his chest.

He buries his face into the crook of my neck, and I start to feel wetness trickle down it. He wraps his arms around my waist and begins to tremble against me, nuzzling his nose into my neck to deeply inhale my perfume, one that he had bought me, “*White Blossom Orchid."*

“Are…are you just going to keep on breaking me like this, then? Leaving me shattered like a million glass fragments, while… I’m still your…husband, *Nimue,* and you're still…my… *wife?* Will you leave me again, and make me lose my mind?” he asks, his voice trembling with emotion. Shuddering myself, I feel the tears begin to run freely down my cheeks.

“I…didn’t want… this. I wanted…to be…*free* from you because our…marriage is… I… can’t… Just let me go, Augustuv. *Let me… go! Please?*” I gasp. He whirls me around to face him, raging anger in his eyes, and flings me backward. I fall into some crates which shatter and break into pieces. I lie there dazed among wood fragments and straw, looking up to see him looming over me.

Covering me with his shadow, he takes hold of my arm. I try to say something to make him stop, but it is useless. He injects the sedative into my arm; helpless, I feel it filling my bloodstream. He hauls me up to my feet, and I sway almost drunkenly into his arms. He starts to lead me out of the alleyway.

LOCATION - THE TUSCANY SAFE HOUSE

LATE AFTERNOON

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

The soft feel of knuckles gently stroking my cheek rouses me from my afternoon nap on the sofa. My eyes flutter open to reveal Will standing over me with concern in his eyes. Stretching my aching muscles, I watch him pick up my sketchpad from the floor; it must have slipped off my lap when I feel asleep. Leaning forward, I wonder where the headache I'm starting to feel is coming from.

"What's going on?" I ask, still a bit groggy, taking the glass of water that Will hands me. Before he can answer, a car pulls up in the driveway of the safe house. I turn to look out the window and see it is Francis' car.

It is the sight of him helping someone out of the car that has Will and I hurrying to open the front door. We are startled to see Hannibal, who had told us this morning that he was heading into the nearby town of Vilenas to do some shopping. Francis leads him over to us, and we are shocked to find Hannibal pale, trembling and looking like he has seen a ghost.

I reach out to take Hannibal in my arms and hold him close to me. The three of us lead him inside and over to one of the armchairs, helping him to sit down. I place the back of my hand against his forehead to check his temperature.

"*Nimue,* you're burning up. Where have you been, darling?" I ask. Hannibal weakly lifts his head to look at me, then seems to curl into himself, as if he doesn't want to tell us what is affecting him.

I reach up to cup his cheek, stroking his cheekbone lightly with my thumb. I lean close to press my lips against his, feeling nothing being given back. His eyes are dull and vacant. I pull away, a familiar feeling of dread beginning to gnaw at my insides. I head into the kitchen, where Will is making a hot drink for Hannibal.

"What's wrong? What happened?" he asks, eyes wide and worried.

I sigh and lean against the kitchen counter, shaking my head. "I don't know. He won't say." We just stand there for a moment, feeling helpless and fearful.

We are startled by Hannibal's sudden appearance at the kitchen doorway. "Anthony? Will? Please come with me." His voice is so low it is barely audible. He holds out his hands to us. We each take one, and he leads us out of the kitchen and up the stairs to our bedroom.

EARLIER THAT DAY

LOCATION - TUSCANY, ITALY

THE SMALL TOWN OF VILENAS

COQUILLE'S TUSCANY APARTMENT

NOONTIME

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Drink this."

"No….no…Let me…go…Let me go."

*"Drink, Nimue or else……I will break our **contract**."*

*Feeling **Carmina** rise within me as soon as he says this, I swipe the glass out of his hand and watch as it shatters against the wall. I lunge at him and he falls back into an armchair. He does nothing to stop me as I bring my hands up to his throat.*

He does nothing but continue to stare at me as I do so, his gaze passive and yet defiant. I find myself lowering my hands and begin to move away. Suddenly he grabs my hips to pull me down onto his lap. He places a hand on my thigh, sliding it upwards under my skirt. I arch my back slightly with a breathless hitched gasp when he cups me through my lace thongs.

*"Oh, my darling…**Nimue,** don't deny it…to yourself…to me. I know part of you still holds love for me," Augustuv murmurs, slipping his hand upward to the seam of the lace thongs, fingering it gently.*

*"I… Augustuv…We cannot do this. Stop…stop… **AUGUSTUV, STOP!!"** I shout when his hand goes further. He shoots his gaze up to me, and immediately his hands push me onto the floor, where I land with a muffled thump on the carpet – close to the bed - with my legs spread wide.*

Augustuv gets up, unbuckling his belt and holding it out in front of him as he approaches me with menace written upon his face. I find myself scrabbling frantically upward. And then he lunges.

I find myself falling onto the bed, where something happens that…frightens me and fills me with pleasure, all at the same time.

LOCATION - TUSCANY, ITALY

THE SMALL TOWN OF VILENAS

COQUILLE'S TUSCANY APARTMENT

NIGHT TIME

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

"Anthony, how pleasant to see you again. Come in."

Willing my heart to stop thudding against my rib cage at the sight of Augustuv once again, so long after he thought he had murdered me, I step inside his apartment as he calmly closes the door behind me.

We head into the sitting room, where I sit down in one of the armchairs close to the fireplace. He pours us both drinks from a decanter, then walks over and hands one to me. I take it from him cautiously as he moves to sit down in the armchair opposite me.

The fire is gently crackling in the hearth. I take a sip of the rich and no doubt expensive wine and glance over at him. He has lit a small cheroot which he is quietly and thoughtfully puffing.

"You were expecting me?" I ask. He takes a drag from his cheroot and blows out thin wreaths of smoke, shifting his gaze to me, then back to the flickering flames.

"Of course. It would only be a matter of time before *Nimue* returned to you two and you decided to confront me regarding what I did to her. You are forgetting that *Nimue*…is still my wife, even if she is wearing your ring," Augustuv says in a matter-of-fact tone that sets my teeth on edge. I place the glass of wine down on the end table between the armchairs, perhaps with a little more force than necessary. I can see he is watching me closely to gauge my next move.

"I can't hate you," I hear myself saying, cursing myself for even saying it. Picking up the glass again, I take another sip of the ruby-rich wine as he places his own glass down on the table.

Calmly he gets up, coming to stand in front of me. He reaches forward to tilt my chin up so I am looking into his harsh, cold, unforgiving eyes as his other hand starts to unbutton my shirt to reveal the scar he had given me. Then, without warning, he bends his head down to my chest, whispering "*I regret...giving you this scar."*

Bringing my trembling hands up, I place them on his shoulders with the intent of pushing him gently away. But I find myself moving one hand to cradle the back of his head, sifting through his hair. Nervously gulping down saliva, I try to give him a warning.

"Brother, please....whatever you're planning right now... don't do something you will regret for the rest of your life. Don't...let it..." The rest of the words won't come out.

"And I wonder how it felt when you killed Gregor - our cousin - and your uncle," he muses. I turn my face away, closing my eyes. *How does he know?*

The next words he says make my heart skip a beat.

"You will help me or else I will send information to Detective Jack Crawford that confirms you murdered them.

You...will...help me...kill...Nimue."

I leap from my chair and lunge at him, slamming him up against the wall near the fireplace. A framed sketch is knocked off the wall. He catches it one-handed, his eyes never leaving my face, then places it calmly on the bookshelf.

He continues to look down at me, being slightly taller than I. Reluctantly loosening my grip on his waistcoat, I know that if I don't agree to help him, he could ruin me.

Lifting my head up, I look into his eyes as I say:

"Tell me...how you want to kill her. Tell me...your design, brother."

ONE MONTH LATER

LOCATION - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

BALTIMORE FBI FIELD OFFICE - INTERROGATION ROOM ONE

MID MORNING

AUGUSTUV-MAGNUS COQUILLE'S P.O.V.

The ticking of the clock on the drab grey wall is the only sound in this dismal room. The clock is the only thing to look at (besides what is obviously a two-way mirror), so I continue to gaze down at the polished surface of the table at which I am sitting as if it were the most fascinating sight in the world.

But when I shift my aching, tense muscles, the chains attached to the handcuffs around my wrists and ankles clink slightly, reminding me I cannot escape even if I wanted to.

A file is placed down in front of me. I glance up at Detective Jack Crawford and back down again. He calmly opens it, starting to speak about the crime scene that been discovered in my Tuscany apartment.

Photos are being spread out on the table, revealing...*Nimue*, my wife, spread out upon the bed covers wearing a white satin-silk kimono, blood splattered around her in crimson wings. The bed cover has been ripped to shreds and the pillows slashed, downy white feathers spread all about.

I slowly reach out and take one of the photos, bringing it closer to my eyes. My sweet, darling *Nimue,* her head turned to one side on the ripped cover, one of a pair of earrings I had given her in her ear.

I begin to realize that even though *Nimue* had loved me in some way, her own way, perhaps this had been her...*Plan*....all along. Or had it been Anthony's?

"Tell me...how you want to kill her. Tell me...your design, brother."

Those words of Anthony's echo in my mind with such noise and clarity that I find myself wrapping my arms around myself, shuddering at the undeniable fact that *Nimue* had managed to break me after all. Crawford's words wash over me, barely audible through the chaos in my mind.

FIVE MONTHS LATER

LOCATION - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

BALTIMORE STATE HOSPITAL FOR THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

AUGUSTUV-MAGNUS COQUILLE'S P.O.V.

TATTLECRIME NEWS

CRIME OF PASSION! Renowned Club Owner Mr. Augustuv-Magnus Coquille Murders His Wife

By Freddie Lounds

It seems not all was happiness between Mr. Coquille and his wife - Mrs Nimue Lurisa Venomis-Coquille. Oh no, my dear readers. In fact, it turns out Mr. Augustuv-Magnus, after certain juicy events, decided to murder his wife in cold blood. Severing her life due to evidence that pointed to the fact that his darling wife was having an affair with another man - renowned poet Mr. Anthony Dimmond. So let me tell you the story....

"Mr. Coquille?" a voice says. I lift my head from the distasteful TattleCrime article that had been printed out for me and see Denise, the female orderly, standing before me. I place the

article down and move it to one side on the small desk I have been allowed to have in my cell.

"Yes?" I reply.

"You have two visitors here to see you," Denise states. I nod silently in reply and indicate that she may let whoever they are in.

Getting up, I smooth down the starchy prison uniform, hoping it isn't just a bunch of "pencil-lickers" or even the infuriating Miss Lounds. I walk around the desk and approach the glass wall with the air holes, watching her silently let in whoever my visitors may be.

The sight that meets my eyes causes me to stiffen immediately in shock. I begin to feel light-headed as black spots invade my vision and a cold sweat breaks out over my skin. I call weakly for Denise as my palms slam against the glass and I begin to slide down to the floor. Everything goes black.

When I regain consciousness, Denise is kneeling at my side, waving smelling salts beneath my nose and calling my name in a commanding voice (I am to learn later that she had been a drill sergeant in the US Army).

"Mr. Coquille! Mr. Coquille! Can you hear me? You fainted, Mr. Coquille. Are you all right?" I manage to nod and mumble something affirmative. "Are you sure? Let me help you up."

She assists me to stand up and checks me over. "Do you feel well enough to receive your guests?" she asks.

I nod and attempt to smile. "Yes, I'm fine now, Denise. Thank you very much, I think I'll be all right."

"Very well. Just call if you need me again," she replies. She locks the cell door firmly as she departs, and I am left alone to face my guests.

Before me stand both of my ex-husbands - Jean Luc LeChiffre, and *Hannibal Lecter - my darling Nimue.*

How is this possible? Nimue is dead!

Jean-Luc takes a nearby chair from a desk and places it in front of the air holes, crossing one leg delicately over the other as he sits down. He clasps his hands together, observing me calmly, and I can see he is wearing a wedding ring with a small hawk on it. He is also dressed in a stylish black wedding suit, a white carnation on the lapel.

Nimue, who has come to stand next to him, wears a crimson suit stitched with black sweet Williams, orchids and roses. A light caramel brown coat is draped over one arm. Their lipstick is a light, delicate shade of electric blue that accentuates those beautiful lips of theirs - ones I knew intimately - and earrings with hummingbirds attached to them sway from their ears. Their gaze is indecipherable.

"Nimue," I breathe. "I... I saw photographs... you - you are *dead!* How can this be?"

Nimue and Jean-Luc exchange a look and a smile. Nimue turns back to me with the same impenetrable gaze.

"You should know better by now, Augustuv," they say with the slightest of smirks. "You can never outwit me. I will always win. Anthony met with you that night with the express purpose of finding out your plan to dispose of me. He returned from that meeting and told Will and I everything. We hunted down a woman who resembled me, killed her, and left her in my place. Quite simple, really," they add, the smirk becoming more pronounced.

I close my eyes and shake my head in disbelief. "You are right, Nimue," I say softly. "You win again. You have broken me." My eyes open and I shift my defeated gaze between the two of them.

"I have had a lot of time to think about past events that have occurred between us," I continue. "What pain, grief and anguish I have caused....the both of you." Jean-Luc and Nimue stiffen only slightly, then compose themselves.

"You want to repent in some fashion for what you have inflicted upon us. You...regret what you have done to us both," Jean-Luc states.

I shudder heavily and, gulping down saliva that has built up in my throat, give a hoarse, broken "Yes."

Jean-Luc unclasps his hands to pull out a sheaf of documents from within his suit. He rises and walks over to the metal receiving tray in the glass wall as Nimue comes up on the other side. They take the documents from Jean-Luc and push them through.

Taking them out, I unfold them to see they are divorce papers for the both of them. An ornate fountain pen is then sent through the tray. I uncap it, glance between my placid visitors, and place the documents on top of the metal tray to sign them.

Nimue calmly watches me. Shifting my gaze up to them, I see the pearl choker around their neck. When I am finished, I send everything back through the tray, then walk back up to the air holes.

"You may leave, Jean-Luc. I...hope you and Mr. Vizla will share a happy life together. If - if you want to keep in touch... Well, that is you and your husband's decision," I say, my voice sounding hollow to my ears. He appears to want to say something to me, only to change his mind as he calmly turns to Nimue and kisses their cheek. They again exchange small smiles.

Sorting his suit, he glances at me one last time, then walks out of the room. I am painfully reminded of that dreadful day when I had seen him walking away from our apartment in the heavy rain with nothing but the clothes on his back. That chapter of my life is now officially over, and I try to ignore the hollow feeling in my chest.

I am now alone with Nimue, who approaches the glass close to the air holes. Their heady perfume, "*Morte-Shade Bloom,"* fills my nostrils, and I find myself tilting my head

backwards with a soft, breathless moan as I remember this was the perfume Nimue had been wearing when we had first met that day at the train station in Florence. I manage to somehow compose myself, lowering my head.

"You wore the same perfume the day we met. It reminded me of an orchid from Lithuania which blooms at night. I believe it was called the Mischa orchid," I say. They turn their face slightly to hide the fact that I had mentioned the name of the one person they had believed all this time to be dead.

"Yes. I know the one you are speaking of, because it grew near my home until it was destroyed by the fighting," Nimue replies softly. They turn their face to look at me. There is such sadness in their eyes that I cannot help but slip my hand through one of the holes in some kind of attempt to comfort them.

Nimue takes hold of my wrist and bends their head down. I have to place my other hand on the glass to stabilize myself as I feel them do what I done to their wrist in the Palazzo Capponi, followed by a gentle, tender kiss to my pulse point.

"Nimue!!" I gasp breathlessly. I try to pull my hand away when suddenly I'm tugged flush against the glass, causing it to judder slightly. I find myself collapsing to the floor on my knees.

Flicking my gaze to the air hole, I feel Nimue's other hand that has slipped through the hole on the left to cradle the back of my head. My face is pulled slightly closer to the middle hole, then their lips fully cover mine, devouring in such a way that tells me this will the last kiss we ever share together.

When Nimue pulls back, a glistening strand of saliva connects our lips together. It is them who breaks the shining thread, while slipping something into the palm of my hand.

"I am returning this to you. Promise me that you will move on, find someone you can love and cherish, not use your violence against. Promise me...you will change...for me," Nimue whispers. I pull my hand back through the the air hole and lower it, knowing just by the shape of it in my hand that it is the ring I had given Nimue.

"You...took it three times, because of how part of you still holds feelings for me. Now....you are free, my nightingale whom I had trapped in a gilded cage. Free to fly away with Anthony and Will," I whisper back, voice trembling with emotion. I clasp the ring tightly in the palm of my hand as I stand up calmly at the same time they do.

I turn around, heading over to the desk where sketches of Nimue lay on the polished surface. I look back over my shoulder one last time at them, standing there as calm and implacable as ever, but with a grateful look in their lovely eyes. Then they silently turn and head out of the viewing area, the double oak doors quietly swinging shut behind them.

I am now left alone, with only the memories of Nimue and the times we shared together: The good, the bad and the ugly.

But it will be the tender moments we had shared in Venice that I would never be able to truly forget. I open my hand and calmly look at the ring - snakes entwined and biting each other's tails as they surround the fiery opal in the center. I wander over to the one of the large arched windows, the only window I am allowed to look out of.

It has started to rain. I can see Nimue heading across the road below to a silver Bentley, where two figures - Anthony and Will - wait for them. I watch them embrace, a kiss shared and words spoken between them. Nimue starts to get into the car, only to pause slightly as they do so.

As if they have sensed I'm watching them, they look upwards to the window and see me looking down at them. Then Anthony distracts them by saying something apparently amusing. They shake their head with a soft smile and get into the car.

Anthony turns his head only slightly but decides not to look up. He heads around the car and slides into the driver's seat. Finally I watch the silver Bentley glide away, feeling that Nimue has taken part of me with them, and has left part of them with me.

Sighing softly, I step away from the window and head over to the bookshelf, picking out the book I had been reading previously. I sit down and open *Evening in Paradise* by Lucia Berlin, as Denise comes in with a radio in her hands and places it on the table in the viewing area.

After fiddling with the dials a wee bit, she finally tunes in the classical music station. A lyrical, relaxing piece of piano music by the composer Joe Hisaishi begins to drift through the air holes as I go to the bookmarked page.

I am starting to read a new chapter of the book, while a new chapter of my life starts now.

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